JULY 1995

LOUIS L'AMOUR
WESTERN MAGAZINE

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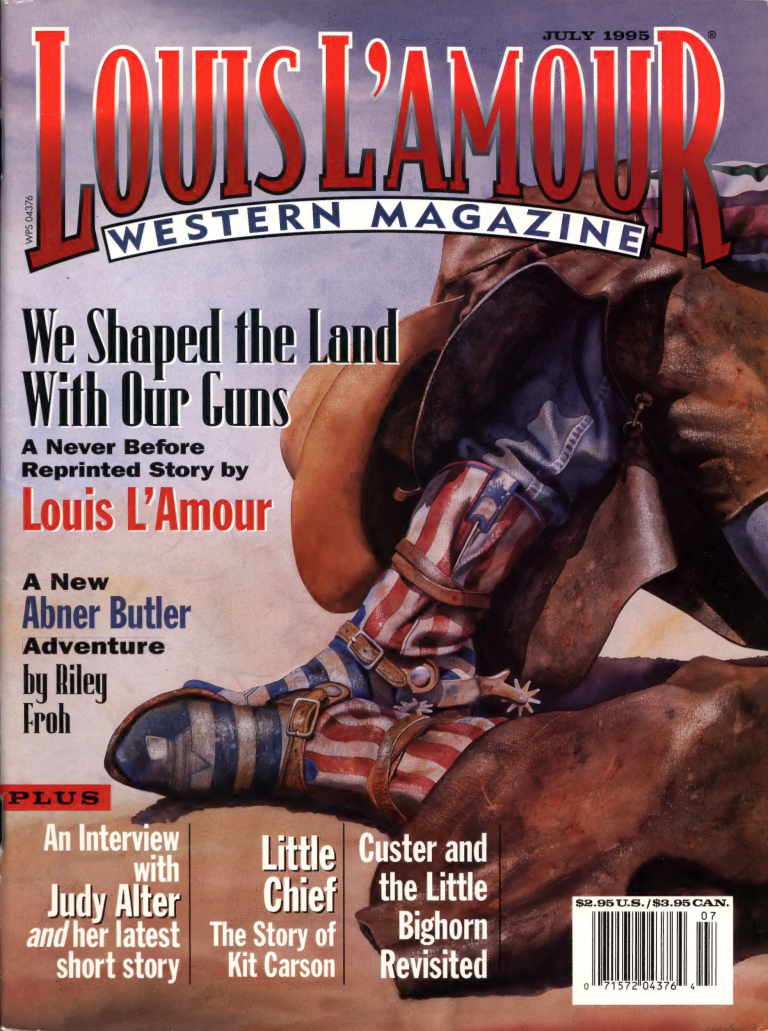

We Shaped the Land With Our Guns

A Never Before Reprinted Story by

Louis L'Amour

A New Abner Butler Adventure by Riley Froh

PLUS

An Interview with Judy Alter *and* her latest short story

Little Chief
The Story of Kit Carson

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LOUIS L'AMOUR WESTERN MAGAZINE

Elana Lore
EDITOR

Jean Traina
CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Chris Robertson
DESIGNER

Marilyn Roberts
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR

Carole Dixon
PRODUCTION MANAGER

Cynthia Manson
VICE PRESIDENT, SUBSIDIARY RIGHTS AND MARKETING

Constance Scarborough
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VICE PRESIDENT, SINGLE COPY SALES

Bruce Schwartz
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Dennis Jones
OPERATIONS MANAGER, SUBSCRIPTION SALES

Meghan Germinder
ASSOCIATE RENEWAL AND BILLING MANAGER

Nyree Dixon
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Fred Sabloff
VICE PRESIDENT AND ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
212-782-8562

Judy Dorman
ADVERTISING SALES MANAGER
212-782-8549

Advertising Representative
FOX ASSOCIATES, INC.
116 W. KINZIE ST.
CHICAGO, IL 60610
312-644-3888

Joachim Rosler
PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER
DELL MAGAZINES

Richard Sarnoff
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
BANTAM DOUBLEDAY DELL PUBLISHING GROUP, INC.

Jack Hoeft
PRESIDENT AND CEO
BANTAM DOUBLEDAY DELL PUBLISHING GROUP, INC.

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America Remembers Salutes film legend and western hero William Boyd with the

HOP • A • LONG CASSIDY CENTENNIAL PRINT

COMMEMORATING WILLIAM BOYD'S 100th BIRTHDAY / June 5, 1995 / and the 60th ANNIVERSARY of the FIRST HOPALONG CASSIDY FILM

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To millions of fans he was the good guy in the black hat. No wrong-doer stood half a chance with Hopalong Cassidy around. William Boyd's sixty-six Hopalong Cassidy films, made between 1935 and 1948, have become western classics . . . but in the 1950s, TV made him its first superstar!

"Hoppy" and his horse "Topper" made us dream of being cowboys. Now America Remembers keeps that dream alive for you.

In honor of the 100th anniversary of William Boyd's birth and his recent induction into the Cowboy Hall of Fame, America Remembers is proud to issue an original commissioned print representing Boyd's very first screen appearance as Hopalong Cassidy, in the 1935 film, **"HOPALONG CASSIDY."** *(This film was re-issued as "Hopalong Cassidy Enters," making this print rarer still!)*

William Boyd and "Mrs. Hopalong Cassidy," Grace Bradley Boyd.

With old movie posters fetching enormous prices at auction and Western memorabilia among the most sought after collectibles, this exclusive print is sure to be in high demand.

The print measures 17 1/2" x 22 1/4" and is printed on acid-free stock exclusively for America Remembers. A Certificate of Authenticity accompanies your print.

America Remember's **"Hopalong Cassidy Centennial Tribute Print"** is being issued in a limited edition of 2,000. After these are reserved no others will ever be printed. This is an outstanding opportunity to own an authorized, signed and limited edition print . . . a piece of history . . . and a piece of your childhood! Reserve yours now.

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An Exclusive Work of Art

For this limited edition print America Remembers commissioned famed artist and illustrator, Jack Thurston, to create a rendition of the original movie poster of the first Hop-A-Long Cassidy motion picture released in 1935. For over forty years Thurston has been creating memorable motion picture posters for Hollywood studios. Among them are classics like Henry Fonda's "Battle of the Bulge" and John Wayne's "Hondo."

With its vibrant Arizona sunset colors the dynamic print makes a handsome addition to any decor or western collection. Rare publicity stills from the Hopalong Cassidy films border the artwork. Look closely and you'll recognize some familiar faces . . . **George Hayes** (before he became known as **"Gabby"**) and **George Reeves** (before he became TV's **"Superman"**), among others.

The ONLY Authorized Centennial Print, Signed by Grace Bradley Boyd

In a very special tribute to her late husband, William Boyd, actress Grace Bradley Boyd, "Mrs. Hopalong Cassidy" has graciously added her signature to each poster. In addition to being the wife of one of the silver screen's most popular stars, Grace Bradley Boyd was a well known actress in her own right, appearing in 34 films. This is the only official William Boyd/Hopalong Cassidy Centennial Print to be authorized by Mrs. Boyd.

Grace Bradley Boyd

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BY ELANA LORE

Many people have written to ask us to publish Louis L'Amour stories in the magazine. Most of his stories are already available in collections published by Bantam Books, so it seemed a duplication of effort. But now, we have managed to arrange to get you a sneak preview of "We Shaped the Land with Our Guns," which is coming out this month in a new L'Amour short story collection called *Valley of the Sun,* published by our sister company, Bantam Books.

Riley Froh's most recent story about Abner Butler and his reluctant accomplice was "The Rookie Rustlers," which appeared in our July 1994 issue. Riley, who is a professor of Texas history at San Jacinto College, is descended from the original settlers of the Sterling C. Robertson Colony established in Mexican Texas in 1833. His ancestors include an Indian fighter, a trail driver, and a Texas Ranger.

We are constantly surprised by the things our writers have done in their lives. Brent Hart, author of "The Six Hundred Pound Nugget," is no exception. He has worked as a technical writer in an aircraft engine factory and as a reporter for a couple of newspapers, built log cabins, and was an assistant harbor master. He sails a thirty-one-foot sailboat, builds muzzle loaders, and pans for gold.

Western Writers of America has just released its list of winners and finalists for the Golden Spur Award. The awards are formally presented at a banquet during the WWA's annual weeklong convention, which this year will take place in El Paso, Texas, at the end of June.

In our continuing effort to bring you the best of the West, we are printing the list of all the winners and finalists for this prestigious award, plus the names of their publishers.

BEST WESTERN SHORT FICTION

*** WINNER ***

Charity
by Sandra Whiting
Louis L'Amour Western Magazine

Hurray for Captain Early
by Elmore Leonard
New Trails, Doubleday

Half a Day from Water
by Gordon Shirreffs
New Trails, Doubleday

The Hog Lot Shooting
by Ellen Gray Massey
Louis L'Amour Western Magazine

BEST NOVEL OF THE WEST

*** WINNER ***

The Far Canyon
by Elmer Kelton
Doubleday

Not of War Only
by Norman Zollinger
TOR/Forge

Cashbox
by Richard S. Wheeler
TOR/Forge

Shortgrass Song
by Mike Blakely
TOR/Forge

CONTINUED ON P. 6

Can you find all seven hidden wolves?

Beautifully embellished with twin bands of 22-karat gold

The map to the wolves hidden in the woods

Is that the howl of the wind or a greeting from the masters of this frozen world? To the warrior on a spiritual journey, the answer is clear. Seven wolves hidden in the snowy woods await his arrival. Man and nature will join, and the strength of seven new brothers will sustain him on his quest.

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Editor's Notes, cont.

Best Original Paperback Novel

★ WINNER ★

Survival
by K. C. McKenna (Robert Vaughan)
Berkley Publishing Group

Crockett of Tennessee
by Cameron Judd
Bantam

The Plainswoman
by Irene Bennett Brown
Ballantine

Wyatt Earp
by Matt Braun
St. Martin's

Best Western Novel

★ WINNER ★

St. Agnes' Stand
by Tom Eidson
Jove/Berkley Publishing Group

City of Widows
by Loren Estleman
TOR/Forge

When Cowboys Die
by Pat Dearen
M. Evans

Hey, Cowboy, Wanna Get Lucky?
by Baxter Black
Crown

Best Western Nonfiction
Historical to 1900

★ WINNER ★

Precious Dust
by Paula Mitchell Marks
William Morrow

Children of Grace
by Bruce Hampton Henry Holt

Such Men as Billy the Kid
by Joel Jacobsen
University of Nebraska Press

900 Miles on the Butterfield Trail
by A. C. Greene
University of North Texas Press

Best Western Nonfiction
Contemporary 1900-Present

★ WINNER ★

Raven's Exile: A Season on the Green River
by Ellen Meloy
Henry Holt

The Oxford History of the American West
ed. by Clyde Milner
Oxford University Press

When Indians Became Cowboys
by Peter Iverson
University of Oklahoma Press

The Great L.A. Swindle
by Jules Tygiel
Oxford University Press

Best Western Short Nonfiction

★ WINNER ★

The Incredible Elfego Baca
by Howard Bryan
Clear Light Publishers

Custer's Art Stand
by Gregory Lalire
Wild West

The Court Martial of Lt. Henry Flipper
by Charles Robinson III
Texas Western Press

Juan Cortina of the Texas Mexican Frontier
by Jerry Thompson
Texas Western Press

Best Western Juvenile Fiction and Nonfiction

★ WINNER ★

A Trail of Tears
(nonfiction)
by David Fremon
Silver Burdett Press

More Than Moccasins
(nonfiction)
by Laura Carlson
Chicago Review Press

Mr. Lincoln's Drummer
(fiction)
by Gary Wisler
Lodestar

A Dangerous Promise
(fiction)
by Joan Lowery Nixon
Delacorte Press

Best Western Documentary Script

★ WINNER ★

One Hundred Years of Hollywood Westerns
Screenwriters: Jack Haley, Jr., Phil Savenik
Producer: Jack Haley, Jr., Productions

Best Western Drama Script

★ WINNER ★

Wyatt Earp
Screenwriters: Dan Gordon, Lawrence Kasdan
Producer: TIG Productions/Kasdan Pictures

Best Western Nonfiction
Biography

★ WINNER ★

Heroe of Beecher Island: Life & Military Career of George A. Forsyth
by David Dixon
University of Nebraska Press

Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist: Life & Legacy of Edward Abby
by James Bishop
Atheneum

Life & Legacy of Annie Oakley
by Glenda Riley
University of Oklahoma Press

Senator Alan Bible & the Politics of the New West
by Gary E. Elliott
University of Nevada Press

Medicine Pipe Bearer's Award for a First Novel

★ WINNER ★

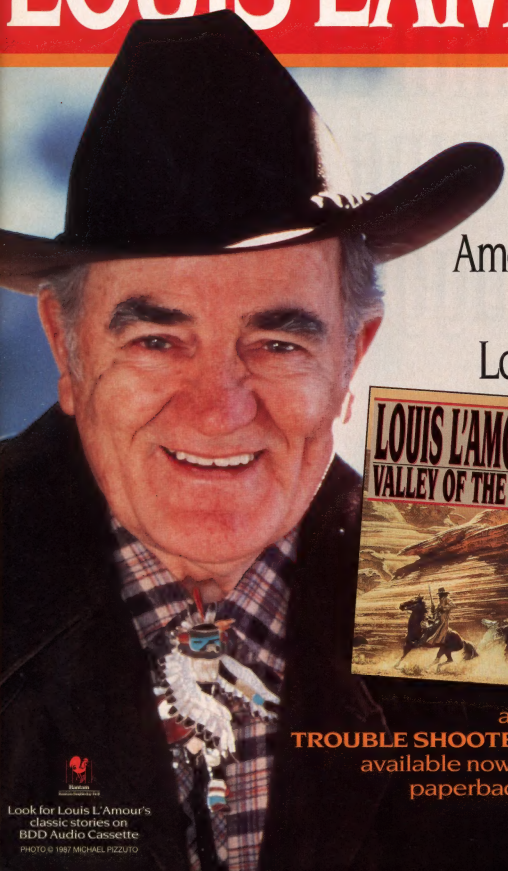
St. Agnes' Stand
by Tom Eidson
Berkley Publishing Group

Wyatt Earp
by Dan Gordon
Warner

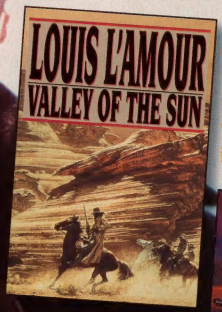
The Journey of Hector Rabinal
by Donley Watt
Texas Christian University Press

The Hookman
by Timothy Hillmer
University Press of Colorado

New from LOUIS L'AMOUR



Two great books from America's Favorite Storyteller, Louis L'Amour!



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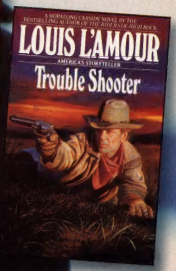

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The Six Hundred Pound Nugget

Every galoot in the West secretly has a hunger in his heart to find a big nugget of gold. But it can become a hell of a problem if you do find one. Especially if you find the blamed thing where me and my partners found our six hundred pound chunk–right smack dab in the alley between the sheriff's office and the Gold Dust Saloon in Rattlesnake Bend, California.

And the whole blasted thing was the result of me and Vinegar Dick Bragg getting into a fistfight in the summer of 1862. But let me start at the start.

Like nearly everyone who came West in those early days I was an easterner, fresh out of Pennsylvania and anxious to find the mother lode. In 1858, I teamed up with Vinegar Dick and One Ear Griswold. Some time later we added our Cherokee partner, Do Well Tall Bear, who spent most of his time sipping at the group's whiskey jug. At first we worried about Do Well getting drunk and trying to scalp us all because everyone said that an Indian never could hold his

ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES PYLE

by Brent Hart

Vinegar Dick had the shortest temper I ever saw, and it got worse as the misunderstanding between the North and South heated up.

likker. I'm here to tell you that's a downright lie. The more Do Well drank the friendlier he became. He'd sit along the edge of a creek working his gold pan with a smile fit to crack his face. He didn't even really look like an Indian. He just looked like a black-haired, brown-eyed miner with a red sort of tan. What set him apart was the fact that he couldn't grow a beard.

One Ear Griswold had come down from Oregon about the time I landed in California and we teamed up right off. He must have weighed nearly three hundred pounds of nothing but bone and muscle, and he was the slowest-talking, easiest-going man I'd ever met. He had a habit of tilting his right ear to you when you talked to him because some drunk in Portland had shot off his other ear and he said that all he could hear on that side was a lot of ringing.

Vinegar Dick Bragg was the newest of the group. He was from South Carolina and kind of a runt. He was a redhead with green eyes and eyebrows so pale you could hardly see them. To top it off he had a mess of freckles splattered all over him. Dick had the shortest temper of any man I ever saw and it got worse as the late misunderstanding between the North and the South got into a heated affair. He wanted to go back and shoot Yankees but he never seemed to get up the money. His frustration caused him to get even nastier—and he usually directed his anger at me when he was drinking because I was a Damnyankee. I never knew it was one word until I heard him say it.

This particular night we were all whooping it up a bit in the Gold Dust Saloon and I was talking to Rabbit Kate, one of the cute blond girls who had a room at the back of the saloon. Kate had, for some reason, took a shine to me and often stopped to talk when she wasn't bouncing miners with her bedstead minuet.

"Well, Sam Petterman," she said, smiling. "If you won't spend your money on me in the back room, maybe you could buy me a drink."

"Why, sure, Kate." I poured her a drink from my bottle and handed it to her.

"Now," she said, tossing off the shot, "let's go out back and get comfortable."

"Naw. I'm savin' you, sweet thing, until ya tell me you'll marry me."

Rabbit Kate roared with laughter. "Why, I'd likely kill you an' you're far too good-lookin' ta die like that."

"Well," Dick cut in, "how 'bout killin' me, then?"

"Why ya little weasel. Ya ain't much bigger 'n a hop frog." She laughed again. "It's gettin' late. Why'nt you boys take the stud home an' put him in the barn."

Dick muttered something at her retreating back as she walked away.

"Now, Dick," I said, "is that the way a Southern boy talks about a lady?"

"Rabbit Kate ain't no damn lady."

"A damn lady," I grinned. "Is that a female Damnyankee?"

He ignored me. I reached over and tapped One Ear on the shoulder. "C'mon. We'd all best be gettin' back ta the cabin."

We went out onto the boardwalk to the hitching post where we'd tied Martha, our mule, with her pack of picks, shovels, and pans. We'd spent the day mining on the Yuba River, a few miles below Rattlesnake Bend, and had been headed back to our cabin on the edge of town when we'd stopped to have a drink.

"Damn thet Rabbit Kate," Dick muttered through his scruffy red beard.

We started to cut through the alley between the sheriff's office and the saloon. It was so narrow a strip of real estate that a wagon couldn't go through it. It was used mainly as a shortcut out of town by miners and their mules, and a Chinaman or two who worked over at Fat Wing's Laundry and Bathhouse.

"I'd like ta know how a woman like Kate can afford to be so particular," Dick growled.

"She don't like runts," I said.

"I ain't no runt, by God!"

Do Well Tall Bear grinned happily in what little light came from the street lamp. "Runt," Do Well said. "Sawed off an' hammered down runt."

"Lousy Injun," Vinegar Dick muttered, and hauled off to take a punch at Do Well.

I caught his arm, and the combination of my grab and his swing spun him around like a top. He

Spirit of the White Wolf

Individually numbered by hand with 24 karat gold.

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Do Well Tall Bear wasn't happy with being lookout until we told him all he had to do was sit outside Kate's window.

whirled off balance and landed flat in the dust of the alley. As he got to his feet, I could see by the lamplight that he was getting mad. What I didn't see was the swing he took at me. It caught me plumb on the jaw and dropped me in the dirt.

Muttering a drunken oath, he yanked a pick from the mule's pack and swung it at me, using both hands. I rolled and the point of the pick crashed into a rock that lay about six or seven inches under the road. The vibration splintered through his entire sawed-off frame. I got up to hit the little buzzard.

"Whoa," he yelped. "Hang on, Sam!"

I stopped and looked at the spot where he was staring. The soft, warm glow of gold winked less than a foot below the surface of the alley in the vague light of the street lamp.

"God," One Ear said over Dick's shoulder. "Pick around there, Vinegar, an' see how big thet chunk is."

Dick began chopping at the dirt and kept hitting hard rock until he had punched a series of holes that was bigger around than a washtub. About that time a window opened in the back room of the Gold Dust and Rabbit Kate stuck her head out. "What the devil're you varmints doin' out there?" she demanded.

"Shhh," I said. "We found a nugget, Kate, right here in the street."

"Well, good fer you, ya drunken idiots. Hell, there's likely nuggets all over this-here town. This is gold country, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but this nugget is big as a tub."

Even in the semidark I could see her blue eyes get wide. "You aim to dig it out?"

"No." I glanced at Vinegar Dick. "Cover over them pick holes, Dick, till we git this figured out." I turned back to Rabbit Kate. "You keep yer mouth shut about this an' we'll cut ya in for a share."

"What's a fifth share of a single nugget?"

"If this here chunk o' gold is as big as I think it is, yer cut alone oughta be around thirty thousand."

"My God," she muttered. "You sure?"

"No, I ain't, but this here is one hell of a big rock."

Kate sobered. "Aw, it can't be. This gulch was all played out in 'fifty-one. Why, there was thousands o' miners hackin' away at every foot o' this place."

"Yeah, but they missed this one," I said, "an' I reckon all the rain we had last winter just washed enough dirt off so ole Dick here could whack it with his pick."

"Well," she said, "you dig it up an' the locals'll all want their share. The mayor, the sheriff, an' every weasel in town will want a piece."

"Not if we don't tell 'em," I said.

"You dig a hole in this alley an' the whole town will know it."

One Ear cut in quickly. "No, not if we dig under the rock an' take it out from the bottom."

"An' the alley will sink," Kate said.

"Not if we shore it up," I said. "The way we kin work it is find out how big this chunk is an' build a platform that will cover the hole. Build bracing under it ta hold up the alley till we get the gold out, then fill in the tunnel."

"No one will ever know," Dick said.

It didn't exactly work out that way.

Rabbit Kate, thrilled at the prospect of becoming rich on her feet instead of on her back, joined in on the operation with gusto. The plan was a simple one, as far as getting to the gold was concerned. All we had to do was lift the boards up under Kate's bed, drop down into the three-foot empty space under the Gold Dust Saloon, and tunnel out to where the rock was. We could pile all our dirt under the saloon while we mined, then put it all back again. The way we figured to actually get the rock out, without having the alley cave in, was to dig around it until we found out how big it was. Then we'd build a platform that would be strong enough to hold a horse, sink it in the ground where the gold had been, and cover it with dirt.

The real question was how to lift an enormous chunk of gold up through Kate's bedroom. We decided that was impossible. The only thing we could do was drag it back under the saloon, set the platform in place, then break the gold up into manageable chunks and take them back to our cabin.

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"I ain't gonna just sit by an' let 'em hang you," I said, "even for stealin' a five hundred dollar Berkshire Silver pig."

To start, there was no way that One Ear Griswold would ever fit in the hole and we needed Do Well Tall Bear as a lookout. He wasn't happy with the idea until we told him that all he had to do was sit outside Kate's window and get drunk while he watched. He could rap on the side of the wall if anyone came around. The biggest problem was that we couldn't dig while Kate was working. She promised to make a noise of some sort when she came in or left her room. The way for us to get in to work was to go through Kate's bedroom window. It wouldn't do for us to go in through the saloon and not come out for several hours.

So, with Do Well watching, and me and Vinegar Dick doing the digging, we decided that One Ear could take the chunks of ore away to store in our cabin and, when we knew the size of the hole, make the flooring that would fit into the alley and cover it with dirt.

We got the tunnel started without much trouble by pulling up a few boards under Rabbit Kate's bed and starting our digging toward where Do Well was watching. We figured we only needed a tunnel about six feet long, and that was nothing. The first night we made our initial hole and got about three feet out toward where the nugget lay. We tossed the dirt under the saloon and used planks and small tree trunks to shore up the hole.

The only time we could work was from about two in the morning, when the girls stopped working, until sunup, when there'd be people apt to come around. On the third night of digging and shoring, we were in the saloon hoisting a few before time to go to work when Do Well came in with a serious look on his face.

"Big trouble," he said quietly.

"How so?"

"We got seen last night. Anyhow, you two did when ya went through Kate's window."

"By who?"

"Catfish Hindaman," Do Well said. "I plumb forgot. Yesterday afternoon the sheriff arrested him fer stealin' one of Ira Buttledorf's pigs."

"Damn," I muttered. "He'll tell the sheriff."

"Not at the moment. Right now he ain't even talkin' ta the sheriff or his deputy."

"How come?"

"Aw, he's got his mad up because he et the pig an' Ira swears he's gonna take him ta court. So he ain't gonna get out fer a month, till the circuit judge gits here."

"Boys," I said glumly, "we got a problem."

It was One Ear who came up with the best plan of all, even though it was a bit drastic. No one cared about Catfish Hindaman being in jail, much less Ira Buttledorf's damned pig, but that barred window was going to continue to cause us problems. One Ear's idea was to bust him out of jail. A couple of horses and a rope around the bars of that window and we could yank it loose.

"Why do you all want the bastard out fer anyhow?" Vinegar Dick argued.

"It don't matter," One Ear said, "about Catfish. We just need ta rip out them bars. If we steal the bars, the town will have ta send ta Sacramento fer new ones. That'll take weeks, an' besides, I'll bet ten t' one they just brick up the hole because it's cheaper. Who cares if prisoners get ta look out?"

One Ear had a good point all right and Vinegar Dick said he knew where we could borrow a couple of good, strong horses.

We solved the problem of the narrow alley, which wouldn't normally allow the horses room to pull, by fastening a heavy wood pulley to the saloon. After we'd tied the ropes to the bars, we'd thread the rope through the pulley and to the horses. In the afternoon I slipped up to the jail window.

"Pssst, Catfish."

"Huh? Oh, hello, Sam."

"Keep yer voice down," I told him. "An' don't sleep tonight. Me an' the boys is gonna bust you out."

"What fer?"

"The pig," I said, trying to sound serious.

"Aw, it was just a damned pig."

"The hell it was," I told him. "That's why ole Buttledorf is so mad. Ain't ya ever heard of a Berkshire Silver pig?"

"No."

"Well, that' what you et. Now, me an' the boys have always liked you, Catfish. I ain't gonna just sit by an' let 'em hang you, even for a five hundred dollar pig."

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Burney Scribbly spent a lot of time with saloon girls at night, then wrote nasty stories about bad girls by day.

"Five hundred— Hang me!"

"Shhh. Keep yer voice down. You got a horse?"

"Yeah."

"All right. When we bust you out tonight, we'll throw off the sheriff. You git yer horse an' ride outt'a town."

"Listen, Sam. I sure wanna thank you boys."

"Forget it, Catfish. I wouldn't let no friend o' mine hang over a pig."

"The thing is," Catfish complained, "where the hell could I run to? Mebbe you an' the boys could hide me till thet circuit judge leaves an' things settle down. Then I could just ride off without bein' chased by a posse."

"I reckon we could hide you in the lean-to room at our cabin. It's far enough outta town that no one would know."

"I'd bless ya for it, Sam."

"All right. We'll chance it."

The sheriff, being a married man, got to spend his evenings at home on the other side of town, and left the deputy at the jail.

The deputy was a skinny little critter named Darnell Foundwell, but everyone called him Darn It. He was as proud as a sage rooster of his deputy badge, but he had a serious weakness. He was totally in love with Rabbit Kate's girlfriend at the saloon, a cute little redhead from the Midwest named Ellie Throngbottom. Ellie was a sweet, good-hearted girl who'd only been in the business a couple of years. We figured we could get Ellie to help us out by going over to the jail and spreading her feminine attributes all over old Darn It.

Kate got her aside and told her that Darn It was itching to bounce her around on the jailhouse bunk, but he was just too shy to say anything. In fact, Rabbit Kate said that Darn It was so shy where girls was concerned that he really had to get liquored up first. Ellie said she knew about that kind of male shyness because the only time her father ever bounced her mother was when he came home drunk from the Iowa Grange meetings. That was why, she said, they only had ten kids.

So Ellie got herself a bottle of whiskey and went over to the jail, after her shift, to launch herself on a mission of mercy. Meanwhile, me and the boys rigged up the ropes, the pulley, and the horses. Do Well, who was checking the jail, came back and said that Darn It was fizzled out like a melted candle. A few moments later, Ellie went across the alley to her room. We kicked our horses and tore the barred window out. In fact, we took out a big chunk of wall and Darn It never even woke up. I cast away my rope and put Catfish up behind me, while Vinegar Dick rode off with the barred window. Do Well gathered up the ropes and the pulley and brought all the gear out to our cabin. We fixed a place for Catfish in the lean-to room and went to bed.

The next day there was hell to pay and the local newspaper, the *Rattlesnake Rattler,* had a big piece about the jailbreak. The editor, Thornton J. Cromly, didn't have the least idea of what had transpired at the jail, but that didn't bother him or his typesetter—they made up a story.

For his part, Vinegar Dick tossed the barred window of the jail into the deepest hole he could find in the Yuba River. He came back to our cabin and we sat about, figuring how we were going to finish our chore. During the day, bricklayers would be repairing the jail wall, and most of the night, Rabbit Kate would be working in her hutch. Still, even with all the problems, we thought we could work about three hours a night.

Our next problem came from the newspaper in the shape of the *Rattlesnake Rattler*'s only roving reporter and the nephew of Cromly the editor—one Burnaby P. Scribbly. He was a skinny little runt with thick glasses and brown hair parted in the middle. He held a diploma from the New Jersey School of Journalism, which was a mail order operation out of Newark and was later shut down when it was learned that the founder was actually a Confederate spy. Burney, youthful tiger that he was, spent a lot of time sneaking little dalliances with the saloon girls at night, then writing nasty stories about the evils of bad girls in the daytime. Luckily, few people in Rattlesnake Bend knew how to read and most only bought the paper to start fires with, or they would have hanged the little varmint.

Anyway, Vinegar Dick and I were working as quietly as we

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Suddenly there was a splintering sound and we saw a Chinese shoe and part of a leg come through a broken board that had snapped.

could under the floor of Kate's room when we heard her hiss at us.

"Pssst! Sam!"

I crawled out of our hole and found her blue eyes wide as she stared down at me.

"I just bashed Burney Scribbly," she said.

"What the blazes for, Kate!"

"Ah, the little varmint wanted to play," she moaned, "but he fell outta bed. He saw the loose boards an' I had to hit him over the head."

"Oh, Lord." I whispered down to Vinegar and we climbed out of the hole to find Burney dead to the world. "Dick," I said, "git the Indian over here to the window. Kate—help me git his clothes back on."

Getting Burney's clothes into some sort of shape was like trying to dress a limp store dummy, but we got it done. Then I grabbed some of Kate's silk stockings to tie him up and gag him.

"Dammit, Sam, I ain't got many of them left!"

"I'll buy you some more." I paused. "Where's the Indian?"

"Right outside," Dick said. "Now, what the hell are ya gonna do with him?"

"Have Do Well take him to the cabin."

"That's kidnapping," Dick said.

"Figure it more like we're borrowin' him. Here. Help me git him out the window."

We shoved Burney out the window. The Indian threw him over his shoulder and started for the cabin. I turned back to Rabbit Kate.

"You need ta git sick," I said.

"Sick? I never felt better in my life. Besides, I can't stop my business. Barnaby Waller'll just make me go over to the hotel t' git well. He'll get another girl."

I thought about it, but she was right. "Then stop enjoyin' yer work so much. At least, stop bouncin' around so much that ya throw men out of bed."

"Well, how much longer . . ."

"We hit it," I told her. "It's a hell of a big chunk o' gold. It's mebbe three feet thick an' as round as a card table."

"Sam," Dick said. "It's gonna be light soon. We'd better quit."

"All right. Blow out the candles an' put the planks back where they belong."

"How're you gonna watch Burney?" Kate asked.

"We ain't. Catfish will. He's so damned happy that we kept him from hangin' that he'll do anything we want."

"Sam Petterman," Kate said, "you're the craziest bastard I ever met in my life."

In the coming days the town of Rattlesnake Bend went insane. Sheriff Morton Smith, who hated the name Morton and who everyone called Brick, was fit to lose his mind. He'd set out to track down an escapee from the jail, only to find that the tracks had disappeared—for which he blamed his drunken deputy. And now one of the minor pillars of the community had vanished into thin air without even leaving a puff of smoke.

Deputy Darn It Foundwell wasn't about to tell Brick what he remembered of the night of the jailbreak because his heart had become so full of love for Ellie Throngbottom that he couldn't bear to have the slightest suspicion cast upon her.

As for us boys, we had our hands full. Burney was demanding everything the Constitution held as citizen's rights and calling down the wrath of God upon the four bandits who had abducted him. Our other prisoner, old Catfish Hindaman, was the happiest prisoner ever held without just cause and he proceeded to ride herd on Burney like a true, dedicated jailer.

We busied ourselves, when we could, with trying to get our gold out of the alley. It was a feat of engineering that the army would have been proud of. We dug a hole all the way around the rock, leaving it standing like an underground golden island, and measured it precisely. One Ear Griswold made a framework to fit over the hole when we pulled the gold away. With the massive nugget pulled under the saloon, we could fill in the hole and chop up the gold at our leisure.

The basic job was done in a night. We ran ropes from the gold under the saloon to four horses that One Ear had on the other side of the building. Do Well stood ready with the board rack that

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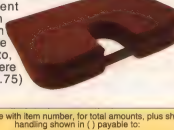

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went over the hole, while Dick and I waited with shovels to cover it with dirt.

At a signal, the horses pulled the chunk of gold away from where it had lain since the dawn of time and the hole in the alley opened up. We dropped the framework into place and covered it with dirt. It took no time at all. One Ear took the ropes off the horses and we crawled down under Kate's bedroom to pull them out through the crawl space. The next night we started to break up the gold. There was so much racket going on above us we wouldn't be heard if we were careful. Besides, as I explained to Kate, chopping much of the gold was like chopping lead.

"I hate ta do this," Dick said. "This could be the most famous nugget in California."

"I'd rather have the money."

Above us, Kate slammed her door so we had to quit work for a few minutes. Then her door slammed once more and we started up again. At the end of our shift, before it got light, we passed our chunks of gold out the window to Do Well to take out to our cabin in his wheelbarrow.

"I demand that you let me go," Scribbly cried as I walked in the door.

"If ya don't shut yer mouth," I told him, "I'm gonna let the Injun burn ya at the stake."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Get some wood, Do Well."

The reporter shut up.

Still, our troubles were not quite over yet. We figured another day or so and the gold would all be broken up and we could fill in the hole. The next night, as Dick and I were slowly breaking up the gold while Do Well stood guard with his bottle, the Indian rapped on the side of the building to let us know someone was coming down the alley. We stopped work.

Suddenly there was a splintering sound and, in the light of our candle, we saw a Chinese shoe and part of a leg come through a broken board that had snapped where a knot had been. A stream of irate Chinese words followed, ending in an audible thud. The foot was pulled out of sight. Dick and I rebraced the board and crawled out the window. Hell, it would be light soon anyhow.

"It was Wong Luc Lee," Do Well said. "I slugged him."

Oh God, I thought. "All right. Carry him out to the cabin an' we'll add him ta the collection."

"Damn you, Sam Petterman," Wong Luc squealed. "You take off ropes pretty quick, by damn! I tell law on you!"

"Shut up, Wong," I said. "We ain't gonna hurt you."

"By damn, I tell everyone you bastards steal me . . ."

"If you don't shut yer trap I'll have Do Well cut off yer damned pigtail."

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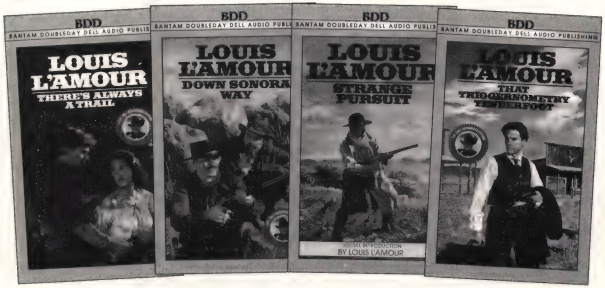

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"No! You don't do this, Petterman."

"All right, then shut up. One Ear—go on down to the store an' git some rice an' whatever else Chinese people eat, so we can feed him fer a couple of days."

"Won't eat no rice," Wong growled. "I tell whole world what you did, Sam Petterman!"

"This whole thing is getting ridiculous," I said. "We gotta get it finished before I go crazy."

In the next few days we did get it finished. We busted up the big chunk of gold and filled in the tunnel under the alley. In order to keep peace we gave our prisoners each a hunk of gold to keep their mouths shut about the kidnapping. They were happy, even though they never knew why they had been snatched.

Scribbly told his uncle that he had been trying to find out what had happened to Catfish Hindaman. It was, he told him, a hot lead that had turned cold, so the *Rattlesnake Rattler* just printed some more lies. Wong Luc's explanation was that he had gone off to pray to Buddha and had gotten lost, but he had found a chunk of gold. That stirred up the town and set off the rush of 1862. Darn It Foundwell just couldn't contain his love for Ellie Throngbottom another minute and rushed over to the saloon to propose to her. As for Catfish, he escaped from the cabin while the whole town was away looking for Wong Luc's lost gold mine, and during that free-for-all we boys dissolved our partnership, divided our gold, and left Rattlesnake Bend.

We ended up with about thirty thousand dollars each and it changed our lives totally.

One Ear Griswold went back to Oregon and bought the farm he had always wanted. I heard later that he married a girl from Washington and they were raising a bunch of kids. Do Well Tall Bear got drunk for a month, then put his money in a Wells Fargo bank and went back to prospect for more gold up the Stanislaus River. Vinegar Dick Bragg caught a stage back to Dixie where, the last I heard, he was happily shooting Damnyankees. And Rabbit Kate? She did what she always wanted to do. She went to San Francisco, married into money, and got herself a fine house up on Nob Hill.

Me? I got trapped into moving to San Francisco myself and later roped into becoming a councilman. Politics rather appealed to me in a sort of criminal kind of way and my wife thinks I'd do well in Washington as a congressman.

"Sam, are you coming to bed?"

"Yes, in a minute. I'm writing."

"Well, I'm cold. Come to bed."

"Hell, Kate, you never was cold in Rattlesnake Bend."

"Dammit, Sam, I told you not to call me Kate! And if you ever mention Rattlesnake Bend again, I'll divorce you. Now, come to bed." ⊠

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by Judy Alter

the art of dipping candles

My mother doesn't make candles anymore. Her candles used to be the smoothest and straightest in North Texas. They burned bright, with an even flame, and never smoked. Ma ran candles in the late fall, when Pa had killed a steer and she had rendered the tallow. She'd make more candles than we needed for daily use for the whole year, just so we could have them all around the house at Christmas. Sometimes in the summer, if she could find beeswax, she made a second batch, but beeswax was hard to come by.

Ma knew just how much clay from the Red River bottoms to put in the kettle so the candles would have some color, and she knew how long to wait for the dirt to color the tallow and then settle to the bottom so that the candles wouldn't be gritty. In front of our cabin Pa had built a stone pit just the size to hold the kettle above the fire. Ma spent hours there, dipping wicks over and over again, hanging the finished candles to dry, admiring her handiwork when she was done.

jeb was fourteen and used to boast about what he'd do if the Comanche came near our house. His boasts had given way to sheer terror.

Sometimes she poured the hot tallow into a mold and it would set in an hour or two on a cold December day, but there wasn't any art in that, she said. Ma liked to dip her candles by hand.

"Mama, can I dip a candle?"

"No, Elizabeth, you haven't the patience yet to make it smooth and straight. Someday. . . ."

I sat and watched, waiting for the day I would be grown enough to dip candles. To be able to dip a candle was the mark of a woman to me. It wrapped up in one skill all the things that a woman did, and I dreamed of the day I had a husband and children of my own to care for. When I was grown, I would dip candles.

Ma was dipping candles that December day and Pa had gone for supplies when Jeb came screaming across the prairie.

"Ma! Indians!" he shouted, running so hard and desperate that I thought sure his lungs would burst. His eyes seemed near bugged out of their sockets and his voice, just beginning to deepen, was now higher than mine. Any other time, I might have laughed at him for squeaking. "Mr. Belton says they struck the Simpsons and they're headed this way." He collapsed on the ground, his breath having completely left him.

Jeb was fourteen and used to boast about what he'd do if the Comanche came near our house. Now his boasts had given way to sheer terror, and it was a terror that was catching. As I watched him approach, like watching a dream in slow motion, I felt my stomach lurch. Fear enveloped me—hadn't we dreaded an Indian attack ever since Pa had moved us out to the banks of the Red River in 1866—and I wanted to run and scream and do whatever I could to shake it off.

If I expected Ma to be as frightened as I was, I was mistaken. Candle in hand she whirled to look at Jeb, but there was no hesitation, no throwing her hands in the air, no instant of wondering what to do. Ma was in control, as though this moment was something she had been anticipating for a long time.

When she spoke, her voice was calm and controlled. "Get inside, Elizabeth, and take Jessamine with you. Go to the attic. *Quickly!*"

Her voice did what no amount of screaming and running would have done—it quieted my fear—and I did as I was told. I grabbed two-year-old Jessamine, who whimpered at my roughness, and pulled her into the darkness of our cabin. It was a good wood cabin—Pa had sent to Fort Worth for the wood, when Ma said she wouldn't spend more than one season in a dugout where bugs and dirt sifted out of the roof into the food.

Behind me I heard Ma say, "Jeb, bring this kettle. Careful, don't spill the hot tallow on yourself."

Jessamine and I peered curiously over the edge of the attic trapdoor, while Ma closed the outside door to the house and threw the great wooden bar across it. Then she ordered Jeb to climb the attic ladder and take the kettle with him.

"Take this kettle up that ladder?" he asked incredulously, having regained his breath.

There was no arguing with Ma. In that same deadly calm voice, she said, "Take it to the attic. Be careful." Then she pulled the boards tight over each of the windows.

Jeb labored up the ladder, having to use one hand to hold the kettle level while he pulled himself up the ladder with the other. A bit of tallow splashed on his leg, causing him to cry out.

"Hush!" Ma ordered.

He barely made it to the top and set the kettle down, with a sigh of relief, when Ma clambered up the ladder behind him.

Once up she pulled the ladder behind her, while we three watched silently.

"Ma?" I asked. "Will the Indians . . . can they . . . will the door hold?"

"Probably not," she said calmly. "Now, listen to me. It is very important that you do not move, do not make a sound if the Indians come near this house." She paused and looked long and hard at each of us. "Jeb, you peek out that crack there and keep watch. Elizabeth, you tend to Jessamine. Give her that sugar tit and make sure she doesn't cry. Rock her if you need to."

With those words, Ma set herself down beside the kettle, clutching it with both hands.

I rocked little Jessamine until she slept, while Jeb, less frightened now and more filled with the importance of his duty, peered

through the crack in the roof boards.

Ma sat by the kettle, her face expressionless, her hands still clutching. I wondered if the kettle was hot next to her body.

"Ma. . . ."

She put her finger to her lips and looked sternly at me, so I hushed.

Ma wasn't much on discipline—Pa always saw to that, while Ma generally surrounded us with her love. It scared me more, now, to have her so grim and unrelenting, when all I wanted was for her to put her arms around me and tell me everything would be all right. She never did do that, the whole long day.

I wanted to ask Jeb how he knew Indians were coming, and ask Ma if she thought Pa would be home soon, and . . . I just wanted someone, anyone, to talk to me. But we were quiet.

It seemed to me we sat that way forever. My legs began to cramp, and I shifted position ever so slightly, causing Jessamine to wake and cry a little and Ma to give me another stern look. We probably hadn't been there half an hour before Jeb, speaking so low we could barely hear him, whispered, "Here they come. Three of them. On horseback."

Ma nodded and then whispered her first words in a long time: "Our lives depend on how quiet you can be."

I could not see them, but I heard them. Their horses raced up to the house, then the hoofbeats stopped suddenly and there was loud talking, which I could not understand. The voices didn't sound angry—they were more curious than anything, I guess.

They stayed outside the cabin so long I was near desperate to ask Jeb what they were doing, but he kept his eyes riveted on the scene he saw through the crack, and Ma sat stone-faced, clutching the kettle.

Then there was a knocking on the door, so loud it startled me and made Jessamine give a whimper. Ma turned the upper half of her body quickly so that she stared at us, and I clamped a firm hand over Jessamine's mouth while I found the sugar tit and gave it to her again. She sucked happily and quietly.

I looked at Jeb, only to see that he was holding his nose, a desperate look in his eyes. He was about to sneeze! I shook my head at him, as though to say, "You can't," and his shoulders convulsed but no sound came. Then I had to put my hand over my own mouth to stifle a fear-begotten giggle. Ma looked grim.

The banging on the door kept on, and the next thing I heard was the splintering of wood. Then there was loud, masculine laughter and shouting, still in that tongue that none of us knew. After that I heard the footsteps—not loud, for they didn't wear leather shoes like Pa, but still a tramping sound, accompanied by much talk. They were wandering about our cabin, knocking over the table, throwing crockery on the floor, laughing all the while.

I thought about my doll, the one I kept on my bed, and wished I'd brought her up to the attic with me.

I looked at Ma. Her knuckles were white, clutching the kettle tightly, tipping it ever so slightly toward the trapdoor opening, though she'd put the board door over it.

Then it came to me—Ma intended to pour that boiling tallow on the Indians if they discovered us.

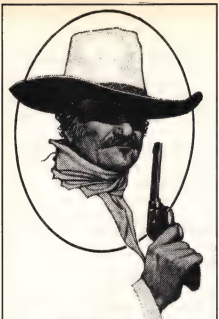
It had been her plan all along, a plan she had probably formulated lying sleepless at night, worrying about the times that Pa was gone and she was responsible for her family. Candles were her pride, and candles would save her family.

Ma didn't have to pour the hot tallow on the Indians. Having done all the damage they could and having taken all the food they could find—corn dodgers from our breakfast, flour, coffee, salt, and sugar—they departed. As I listened to their horses' hoofbeats fade into the distance, I thought it was a good thing they hadn't come tomorrow, when Pa would just have gotten back with enough supplies to help us celebrate Christmas, and I was grateful they hadn't found the steer carcass that Pa had hung in the lean-to.

the Indians were wandering about our cabin, knocking over the table, throwing crockery on the floor, laughing all the while.

Jeb watched intently long after the sound of the hoofbeats was gone. At last he said, "They're gone." Then he added matter-of-factly, "We'd best go clean up the mess."

I started to cry, the relief from tension somehow bringing my fear to the surface. I just sat there, clutching Jessamine and letting big tears run down my cheeks while I sobbed quietly, my



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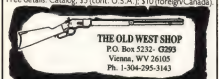

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shoulders heaving. I knew Ma would come take me in her arms any minute.

Instead, her voice was harsh when she said, "Quiet! They'll be back."

"Ma," Jeb complained, "they ain't comin' back. They're gone."

I cried on and Jessamine began to whimper, and all Ma did was clutch that kettle and command us to be quiet.

Short of shoving her out of the way, there was nothing we could do—and we children didn't dare do that. We knew something was wrong, terribly wrong, but she was our mother.

So we sat the whole long day, until dusk began to take away the light filtering through the cracks in the roof. Jessamine was hungry and fretful in spite of my best efforts to quiet her, and she needed to be changed desperately, which made me hate having to hold her. I myself began to need a trip to the bushes so badly that I squirmed from time to time. Jeb drummed his fingers on the board floor and wriggled in impatience, though I thought he too might have longed to run for the bushes. But Ma never moved, never loosened her hold on that kettle.

"Here comes Pa," Jeb said softly.

Within minutes we heard the clop of the mules, the creak of the old wooden wagon, and then Pa's terrified call.

"Margaret! Jeb! Where are you?" His heavy boots thundered into the house.

"We're up here, Pa," Jeb said.

Still, Ma did not move. Jeb looked for a long minute, while Pa was downstairs demanding to know what had happened and if we were all right. Shrugging hopelessly, Jeb went to the trapdoor, pulled it up, and lowered the ladder.

"You better come get Ma," he said.

Pa had to pry her fingers from the now-cold kettle and carry her bodily downstairs. Jeb followed and then held up his arms to take Jessamine from me.

I had to bolt for that trip to the bushes, and while I squatted there I prayed that when I came back Ma would be her old self again, proudly telling Pa how she'd saved us from Indians.

She never did tell him. We had to do it for her, Jeb and I both babbling at once, while Ma sat in the rocking chair where Pa had placed her and never said a word, never moved, didn't even seem to recognize us. When at last the story had come tumbling out, Pa looked around at the mess the Indians had made—broken crockery, flour and sugar and salt spilled before they were stolen, blankets ripped off beds, and my doll flung into the fireplace, probably the cruelest blow of all to me—and then he went to kneel by the rocker.

"Margaret, you saved our children. You . . . you are the strongest and most wonderful woman I know."

She smiled just a little and reached a hand out to stroke his beard.

I thought that smile meant Ma was back to herself, but I was wrong.

It's been a year now, and she still sits in the rocker. I cook the meals and clean the cabin and care for little Jessamine. Pa says to give Ma time. "She'll be all right," he tells me. "She's just had a terrible shock."

Pa has butchered a steer and it's time to make candles. I try, remembering what Ma said about patience, but my candles are lopsided—they bend in the candlesticks instead of standing straight and tall.

I want Ma to come back and dip candles. It's a fine art, candle dipping is.

Out of Soap

BY RILEY FROH

ABNER BUTLER, MY BEST FRIEND AND OUR PASTOR'S SON, WAS NOT ONE TO TAKE REVERSAL OF FORTUNE LIGHTLY. HE GRIEVED OVER OUR BOTCHED ATTEMPT TO RUSTLE CATTLE DURING THE TEXAS CENTENNIAL. HOURS OF PREPARATION HAD GONE INTO THAT ENTERPRISE AND NOW, MONTHS LATER, HIS FACILE MIND WAS SCHEMING FOR A WAY TO RECOUP OUR LOSSES IN TIME AND EFFORT.

I POINTED OUT THAT AT LEAST WE HAD GOTTEN OUT OF THE CATTLE-STEALING FIASCO WITHOUT BEING APPREHENDED. ABNER STRESSED THAT WE HADN'T MADE ANY MONEY AND THAT, MOREOVER, OUR REPUTATIONS WERE AT STAKE, EVEN THOUGH ONLY WE TWO KNEW OF OUR INEFFECTUAL COVERT OPERATION.

"WE HAVE TO LOOK EACH OTHER IN THE EYE AND KNOW THAT WE FAILED," HE SAID IN HIS DRAMATIC WAY.

BROTHER BUTLER, HIS FATHER, HAD THROUGHOUT THAT WHOLE SEASON OF OUR NASCENT CRIMINAL ACTIVITY DENOUNCED

ANY TIME ABNER STARTED BRAGGING ON HIS SUPERIOR INTELLIGENCE, YOU COULD BE SURE HE HAD SOME SINISTER PLOT TURNING OVER IN HIS MIND.

Hollywood and all its graven images on the silver screen from his pulpit in our little crossroads village. He particularly thundered forth against reflections of Mae West and Jean Harlow, curved harlots of dangerous proportions, whose mouths dripped honey and no telling what other ingredients of sin. But he made the mistake of letting Abner attend western films with me, reasoning erroneously that we would emulate the guys in the white hats. *I* would have, of course, but Abner, for all his talent and physical beauty, wore only black. And, being weak, I would follow him in those days.

It was in the Wel-Tex Theatre in Waelder, Texas, one Saturday afternoon, that Abner got the idea for our ill-fated cattle-rustling operation. He hatched the mad scheme to rob a Southern Pacific passenger train as we viewed two stuntmen performing grand larceny on a make-believe railroad. We emerged from the darkened interior, squinting at the intensified glare of the sun on a warm spring afternoon. As we clomped up the sidewalk toward the wagon yard to get our horses, Abner began to describe his new plan with an enthusiasm that always hooked me.

"See, them James boys and them Younger brothers had some good ideas," he analyzed. "But they just wasn't bright enough to really cash in. They robbed them little milk run trains with just the common people ridin' 'em. Now, the way I figure it is that you hit an excursion line like the Sunset Limited that runs right through here on the way to California. Them folks carries cash on 'em. All the time."

Instinctively, I knew he was serious. Any time Abner started bragging on his superior intelligence, you could be sure he had some sinister plot turning over in his lively mind. It is a tragedy that Abner rarely put his considerable brainpower to work in the right direction. He had an IQ so high that it was hard to measure with any certainty, and his academic records at Baylor University still stand. I often wonder how far Abner could have gone had he entered the business, medical, or academic world. But his sinful instincts and his penchant toward larceny quite logically guided him into the profession of law.

We turned into Miller's store, where I took a lot of time making up my mind whether to spend our last nickel on a Hershey bar or a Baby Ruth. Abner shoplifted two cans of Underwood sardines and had me exchange the candy bar for a five-cent block of cheese as I was trying to pay. We unloaded some feed off Old Man Jobe's pickup so he would give up our horses without the fee from the wagon yard.

Easing out the gate, we started the long ride home. We clopped down the alley behind Main Street, cut across the old school ground, and turned onto the dusty lane winding off into the post oaks in the distance. On the other side of Sandy Fork Creek Bridge we stopped to have our snack. It was cool in the shade under the trees by the water. I fished some Nabisco crackers out of my saddlebags, and we munched our makeshift picnic in silence while the horses cropped the new spring grass and the shadows lengthened and the brook gurgled against the pilings deep in the sandy creek below the ancient, rotting bridge.

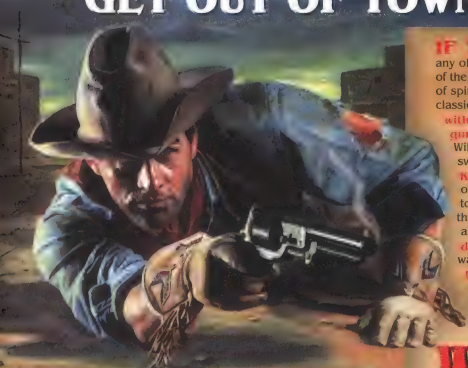
The squirrels that had gone into hiding at our approach came out to frolic in the limbs and nibble at the new buds. Birds came flashing down the steep bank, rocking on the willowy reeds and splashing in the shallows while fussing or singing as their mood and changing conditions struck them. Now and then a bullfrog boomed. We lay back against a log that was old before we were born, smoking the last of our Chesterfields. I would have been content to remain in silence and daydream about Abner's older sister, Rachel, but he had his train-robbing project on his mind.

"See, we'll tie the horses at the top of the grade at Ivy Switch," Abner elaborated. "Then we'll 'borrow' the handcar out of the section shack and coast down to the bottom of the slope as we soap the tracks along the way. All we have to do then is wait for the passenger engine to slow down as it spins up the grade on them slicked down rails. We'll climb aboard the observation car, and the rest is all in the picture show. Naturally, we'll have to be done with our business and be ready to jump and run for the horses when that thing picks up speed on the other side of the switch. We'll just rob the observation car, but that's where the money's at."

"Oh, it'll work," I mused, "but it don't make no difference 'cause we ain't goin' to do it. Stealin's just flat wrong."

"You liked them sardines, didn't you?" Abner grinned.

HE ORDERED FORTY ARMED MEN "GET OUT OF TOWN – OR ELSE!"



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"EVEN IF WE DO ROB THE TRAIN, WHICH WE AIN'T," I POINTED OUT, "THEM PEOPLE AIN'T GOING TO GIVE UP THEIR MONEY WITHOUT A FIGHT."

"You know I did. But that's different."

"No, it ain't. Stealin's stealin'. And, if we hold up that train we won't need to borrow from Miller's store no more. Wouldn't you like to have a Coke and an ice cream to go with them sardines?"

"It ain't worth the risk for Coke and ice cream."

"Right, if that's all we'd be able to buy. But we'll have over a hundred dollars. Probably a lot more. We can buy that 30-.30 from the pawnshop in Austin and enough shells to run our poaching operation all winter. And with that kind of money, we'll never run out of whiskey, like we're always doin'."

Now here was an argument with some weight. And thus it runs: you find the ends you want and then rationalize toward them.

Abner unfolded himself from his reclining position on the ground, eased over to his horse, and began to tighten the cinch. I followed suit. I knew the wheels were turning in his creative mind. We swung into our saddles and Abner led out down that beautiful, tree-lined dirt lane.

"The Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas is Saturday after next. Your folks is goin' with mine, and every other deacon from the county will be there," reasoned Abner. "Yep, that's the perfect day. See, y'all are even closing your store."

Our town didn't have a name. It was always just referred to as The Crossroads. It consisted of the Baptist church and the parsonage where Abner's family lived; our old landmark general store where my family sells groceries, feed, harness, clothes, hardware, and anything else farmers and ranchers needed; the old schoolhouse and playground; and a few scattered homes. It was really not much to speak of, but the little community we called home served a large rural area lying in that remarkably isolated area of sand hills, post oak, and mesquite between Bastrop and Waelder. It was a wonderful world to grow up in even in the Depression-plagued 1930s, but like all good Southern boys on any economic level we each owned a horse, a dog, and a gun, and there was just never a dull moment around Abner.

"Of course, they'll bring Rachel home from Baylor to watch us," Abner continued, "but she ain't got time for us 'cause of that long-headed Bohemian she's sweet on."

Abner had touched a nerve there. His sister, my secret love, was unearthly lovely and unbelievably attractive to me. Not quite as shrewd as Abner, she was nearly parallel in intelligence, which left her with more brains than she ever needed; moreover, she had none of his criminal temperament. Both inherited intellects from past family members that make a distinguished list of preachers, teachers, and workers for the Baptist history of Texas, but she got all the positive traits, leaving only negative ones for her baby brother. Rachel was strong-willed and she did have a mind of her own, but everything she did was in the context of the Ten Commandments that her brother tended to break regularly. I have been in love with her for as long as I can remember, but we didn't start dating until Abner and I were freshmen at Baylor when she was a senior, and then our serious courtship only started after Abner and I left Baylor with our degrees.

It bothered me that she had fallen for a boy her own age at the time of our Great Train Robbery, but I understood; or else I could live with the situation, for I knew that things would never work out between this Baptist and that Catholic. Brother Butler had forbidden his only daughter to even date the Papist, but they saw each other on the sly. I had spied on them enough to know that they never got past the hand-holding and smooching stage, but I bitterly resented that son-of-a-dairyman ever touching those sacred, rose-petaled lips, not to mention running his big, square, farm-trained hands over that figure that was so similar to the ones on the movie stars her father didn't want Abner and me watching.

"Yep, we're definitely covered that weekend," Abner repeated with satisfaction.

"But even if we do it, which we ain't," I pointed out, "them people ain't just going to give up their money without a fight."

"They will with my pistol pointed at them," Abner corrected me with his worst grin.

"That settles it," I declared. "There ain't going to be no robbery 'cause there ain't going to be no gun."

"I ain't goin' to put no bullets in the gun," Abner intoned logically. "I don't want to take no chance on killin' someone."

We rocked pleasantly along in our saddles for a spell while Abner let that promise soak in. His timing was excellent, and just at the right moment, he reminded

EVERYBODY IN OUR NECK OF THE WOODS KNEW THE SECRET OF THAT TREACHEROUS MAELSTROM ON THE GUADALUPE RIVER.

me of the Southern Pacific bull who had thrown us off the freight car between Flatonia and Schulenburg one afternoon. I'll never forget the malignant grin on that cruel face watching us roll along the track after we jumped to avoid his club. "We ain't never got revenge for that day," Abner reminded me, "and any train company that hires a sadist like that deserves to be robbed. Besides," he argued, "all of them people we rob is goin' to turn in a claim to the Southern Pacific, and they'll pay them off for public relations. So in the end, we really ain't stealin'; we're just gettin' even."

What worried me was that Abner was beginning to make sense —a sure sign that I was starting to weaken. We rode along in the lazy evening warmth for a spell.

"Hold on!" Abner suddenly cautioned. "Let's watch these horses and see what they do."

We were approaching the site of our county's most famous murder—a crime still unsolved. As a poor family of five waited in their wagon for one of the members to open the gate leading to their sharecroppers' shack, the murderer stepped from concealment, axed the father first, then chopped the mother before whittling away the children, ages three through nine, one at a time. Horses shied away from the spot and dogs passed by on the other side of the road, their tails between their legs, supporting the legend that the spirits of the victims still haunted the location.

Brother Butler, Abner's father, maintained that the animals merely reacted to the nervous state of the people with them and that if alone, neither horses nor dogs would even notice the locality. Other community leaders claimed to have watched from a distance as animals passed by unconcerned. But sure enough, our horses began to dance and cut up just as we reached the turn-in to the old home, standing empty and nearly fallen down in the distance, never having been lived in again since the multiple homicide.

"I ain't makin' mine jump," I said. "He's doin' it on his own."

"I ain't neither," Abner observed as he brought his horse under control. "But I still think it's a habit with these old boys and nuthin' more. See, that's one thing me and Daddy's got in common. We don't neither one of us believe in superstition."

"I reckon not," I agreed, pointing to his spurs jingling along beside us. "You got them nice *espuelas* off a dead man, as I remember."

"Sure did," Abner nodded. "That's the only way I could get any this nice. Wouldn't nobody else wear 'em. Bad luck, they says. Well, that's my good luck."

"That old boy drowned when he jumped his horse off in the Guadalupe River," I mused. "Right below the Belmont Bridge, I believe. They was chasing some wild cattle that crossed right above there. Course, he didn't know about that whirlpool. Him and the horse both drowned as I remember."

Abner and I and everybody else who grew up in our neck of the woods knew the secret of that treacherous spot on that river.

If you jumped relaxed, the maelstrom whirled you once and then spit you out down stream. But the cattle buyer who ended his life in that section of current was from out of the county. He had bought the herd on the place on the hoof, contingent on his catching them and driving them off. He was a good cowboy and serious about his work. When a couple of wild steers crossed the river upstream to emerge farther down on the other bank, he went in after them. The last time he used those spurs got him killed.

Brother Butler was on the bank comforting the grieving widow when they pulled the body from the tangle of driftwood far downriver. She gave the spurs to the cowboy who had discovered her waterlogged husband. The cowhand discreetly cast the jinxed objects aside, and Brother Butler picked them up and gave them to Abner.

This conversation carried us a good way past the haunted site and our horses had settled into that easy gait so conducive to deep thought. I knew that Abner was preoccupied with the design of his next major felony. He turned our conversation to the outline of his wrongdoing with the same cunning attention to detail that he devoted to all his crooked schemes. He sought novelty in his violations of the statutes, and he took perverse pleasure in breaking conventions. It was this early self-education in willful opposition to the law that later made him one of the best criminal defense attorneys in the great state of Texas. "Honest Abner Butler, Just Attorney," as his business card read, made it possible for parties guilty of moral depravity, corruption, and deep degradation to walk the streets rather than spend time behind bars where they belonged.

Even though in our youth Ab-

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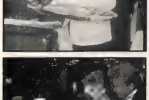

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AFTER STAKING OUR MULE AT THE OLD SILVER MINE AS PART OF OUR ALIBI, WE TURNED SOUTH TOWARD OUR RENDEZVOUS WITH THE TRAIN.

ner made much of the economic rewards of part-time crime, mainly to elicit my support, I think the monetary returns took second place to the sheer joy of breaking the standards of propriety, showing disobedience to the rules, or just plain defying everything his father stood for, as well as government, law, and order. The main source of his devilment lay in his intellectual superiority, which in turn led to his good-natured arrogance. There was very little humility in the heart and soul of Abner Butler, and, just as his father preached Sunday after Sunday, the devil cannot abide in humility—only God can. I have asked myself time and time again over the years why, with all my good sense and all my moral scruples, I followed him so many times down those dark paths he explored. The answer lies in that capacity Abner later demonstrated so frequently in the courtrooms of Texas. He had a way of temporarily convincing people of otherwise sound mind that wrong was right. Whole juries of twelve tried and true bought his bill of goods; so it is not so strange that I, his best friend, fell under his spell at times. And, of course, I was a lot younger then—and finally, I was eternally connected to Abner by bonds of infatuation for his lovely sister.

I finally agreed to the robbery in my mind, but as usual, my heart wasn't in it. And to the same degree that Abner relished and glorified in the project, I worried and fretted about the foolishness of the whole business. But the Southern Baptist Convention grew near, our parents departed for Dallas, my secret love came home from Baylor to watch us, and the stage was set. The next morning, Abner's father preached on the eighth commandment. I couldn't even look at Abner.

All the following week, Abner had noised it about, to his father's great relief, that we were going to dig at the old silver mine all day the Saturday they were gone. All family members knew that any time we searched for the lost Spanish silver we were good for the whole day, and we couldn't get into much trouble that far out in the woods. Abner could always come up with an alibi—for us in our youth and for any criminal that would pay him in his early manhood. This fabrication also made it possible for Abner's angelic sister to cover for us, since she would assume we were there while she sneaked off to the dairy to see her blunt-headed boyfriend. My concern was that that Catholic milker would be trying to move his callused hands from the cows' udders to Rachel's others.

We even led a pack mule loaded down with picks and shovels with us when we rode out at dawn on that spring Saturday. We three—Abner, Rachel, and I—had grown up together, going in and out of each other's homes for years, and we had that familiarity common to siblings so that we often saw each other in nightclothing or other disarray. For that reason, I often spied more of Rachel's lovely hide than I should have, and when she waved us good-bye from the back porch that morning, her dressing gown was parted, and her nightgown was open above that provocative milky, rolling cleavage, and the auburn tresses of her hair were falling down under the front of her nightdress in an innocent way that was curiously and strangely erotic.

After staking our mule at the old silver mine as part of our alibi, we turned south, riding toward our rendezvous with a passenger train bound for an interruption of their journey. We were two ghosts from the past, emerging out of the concepts of a Hollywood meant to fade in and out of a black-and-white screen world—not designed to leap into the three-dimensional reality of a spring afternoon in Texas in 1937.

Abner moved ahead of me, sitting easily on his horse and totally detached from all surroundings for a time, and I knew he was assuming in his mind the role of his heroes, Stonewall Jackson and J. E. B. Stuart, two contrasting personalities of the great Southern Confederacy—the one austere and cold; the other, warm and human—but both deadly. I figured I had better get my courage in quickly before Abner started giving peremptory orders.

I hadn't gotten over a couple of nips down before he turned to me with his usual ironic grin. "I'd go easy on that stuff," he said sternly but with a smile (in the Southern army during the War Between the States, officers gave orders in the form of a request in order to preserve the pride and integrity of each rebel soul, so Abner was still in character).

"We got to be clearheaded when we climb on and off that train here directly."

"Right," I answered, flipping the cover of my saddlebags loudly while shifting the bottle to my other hand so that Abner wouldn't

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We rattled the handcar onto the tracks and began to coast down the grade with each of us soaping a rail behind us.

know that I kept that nerve tonic out to finish it off.

I was chasing my whiskey with dewberries picked from the profuse vines as we rode through those densely wooded slopes. It was as beautiful and sparkling a day as God ever made. Birds virtually split their throats in musical efforts, while those not singing flashed around us in colors of blue, red, gold, brown, and black. At times noisy fights broke out between suitors among the thick growth. My heart sank among the splendors as I realized how pleasant it would be just to bird watch and not be burdened by a train robbery. I took another sip of Jim Beam and temporarily reversed my sagging mood.

Naturally, we were staying off the roads. From our legal coon hunting and our illegal deer poaching, Abner and I knew every gap in all the fences, each unlocked gate between properties, and we possessed an uncanny knack of finding unstapled fence posts with loose strands of barbed wire that we could push down and lead the horses over. The important thing was to keep out of sight.

Leaning over out of my saddle to scoop up a trio of unusually ripe and juicy dewberries, I spied right below my hand the sinister coils of a three-foot copperhead, malignant eyes piercing mine as he lay in wait for a house wren or redbird to enter into the interior of the path where the best fruit grew.

"Whatcha see?" asked Abner when I didn't move on.

"Copperhead," I answered, as Abner circled up beside me.

We stared at the silent reptile for some time. I knew Abner wanted to catch him, and I was glad we didn't have time. Although I could never bring myself to touch a snake—still can't, for that matter—Abner ran a regular sideshow with any poisonous type we came across. He liked handling them for the thrill involved or for the danger factor or for whatever innate kinship he had with them. Abner was dissolving a rattlesnake in a bottle of grain alcohol he had stolen from the Baylor science lab when we visited Rachel at college one weekend. I knew he was going to try to drink it one day, either thinking he could take on some of the characteristics of the deadly creature or else become immune to the bite. He could be a regular Frankenstein at times.

One of those quiet moments fell over us that we often experienced in our lifetime excursions into the woods. Birds ceased their song; insects stilled their frictions; then strange noises broke the silence, sounds that were wrong and out of place for the outdoors we knew.

"It's two buck deer fightin'," I offered.

"No it ain't," Abner countered, "but it is somethin' big in a tussle. Come on. Let's check it out!"

We thundered into a little clearing cut across by a barbed wire fence just in time to glimpse three coyotes scurrying into the brush on the other side. Caught in the top two wires was the right hind leg of a massive whitetail buck where he had misjudged his jump. He could stand on his front feet and struggle in a semicircle, from which position he had fought off the coyotes. They would have worn him down and gotten him had we not come along.

While I was wondering what to do, Abner guided his horse over to the fence, jammed down one wire with his boot toe while pulling up the other. The deer melted into the woods in a moment, and like always, you wondered if he had ever been there, so quick was his exit.

"He's a big un," Abner exclaimed. "A regular wall hanger. We'll get him next fall while them oil men that hunt here are drinking and messin' with their satchels they bring down from Houston."

"If we ain't in jail we will," I said, not in jest, for I saw in my mind Abner and me apprehended for our nefarious plots against the order of the great state of Texas, our evil designs on the efficiency of the Southern Pacific Railways, and our callous breaking of every interstate commerce statute between Maine and California. I knew the trapped deer was a sign we would be caught and incarcerated.

"We'll get away, just like that deer," Abner roared. As usual, he took the positive view—he was altogether incapable of fear—and spurred gracefully away. I swallowed another sip of nerve juice and took out after him.

We could hear the freights rumbling by long before we reached Ivy Switch, and those lonesome whistles as the engines approached nearby Luling guided us to our destination right on schedule. We tied the horses on the side of the tracks away from our getaway (Abner wanted the authorities to surmise that we had headed south toward Mexico in-

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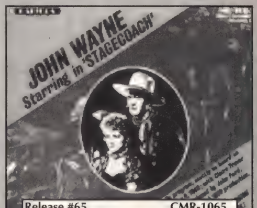

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"STICK 'EM UP," YELLED ABNER AS HE GAVE THE DOOR A HEALTHY KICK. HE SEEMED MOMENTARILY STUNNED WHEN THE DOOR DIDN'T MOVE.

stead of north back toward the crossroads) and hammered the lock off the section shack. Then we rattled the handcar onto the tracks and began to coast down the grade with each of us soaping a rail behind us.

Abner had stolen a good deal of both Lava and Palmolive, so we had more grease than we needed. Where he got the gloves we wore I don't know, but it's a good bet he didn't buy them, for he had much more than a limited acquaintance with the art of burglary. At the foot of the incline we rolled the handcar off the tracks and watched its ponderous bounce down the grade. As a final good measure, we resoaped the rails at this point, even mashing several whole bars down on the steel rails where the wheels would first hit the slick surface. Abner walked off a piece into the woods, stuffed the ruined gloves into an armadillo hole, and stomped them in. He brushed out his tracks back to our waiting spot, where we donned our old regular gloves (we weren't going to leave any fingerprints in our first federal job) and waited to rush the train.

The euphoria of the early stages of alcohol had worn off, leaving me queasy from both withdrawal and fear, but the slight nausea helped me reconcile myself to my fate. If I quit on Abner now, he'd go it alone. Only if you had had the same experience of being led by your best friend and blood brother could you understand how I let myself get trapped in so many compromising situations.

I studied this slim, athletic, neat, intelligent, and beautiful creature, altogether superior to every other individual or situation he ever encountered.

His father, a respected man of God among many distinguished preachers, who had given the prayer at the inauguration of not one but two governors of the great state of Texas, stood in such contrast to his son. But John Wesley Hardin's father had also been a man of the cloth, and Abner's daddy and the noted outlaw's sire were not the first nor the last minister to produce sons who could raise much more hell than their fathers could ever preach against.

Abner began to check his outfit, even spinning the rowels of his spurs, and I knew he was playing the role of some Hollywood star. He would have made a fine screen actor.

Then we heard the train coming. The moon and the stars may vary a little and even a Hamilton railroad watch gets off a second or two, but the Sunset Limited between New Orleans and San Diego arrived, as always, right on time, a humming perfection of a machine chugging up the grade toward Ivy Switch and pulling twenty-two cars of happy travelers, only a mile from their rendezvous with a destiny that FDR didn't have in mind for them. Ours was the last old-time train robbery of any generation.

The blunt head of the stylized and streamlined engine appeared around the bend where the ribbon of tracks ran together in the distance. Then the whole string of cars rounded the curve, rocking gently and gracefully in a peculiar pattern as each car emulated the previous one's movement on the uneven slope. Abner adjusted his bandanna over his nose and, monkeylike, I did the same. The locomotive steamed ponderously to a point parallel to our concealment.

But then it shuddered frighteningly, steel wheels spinning uselessly as the engine was knocked forward by the tie of cars still rolling on firm track. For a horrifying moment I thought it was going to jackknife and turn over.

"It's gonna wreck!" I screamed above the maddening screech of iron.

"No, it ain't," Abner yelled joyfully, "but we sure give it a metal hernia, not to mention the extra bounce we give to them young couples in them Pullman cars."

Now the whole train rammed and shocked and bumped and skidded and ground forward as the sheer weight and spinning power of the heavy wheels whirred and burned away the soap and bit down into new traction on the iron rails. The next to the last car jerked past and the observation coach lurched after it.

"Let's go, pardner," Abner shouted, and suddenly I found myself running after him. I could hear my heart pounding above all the racket, but I couldn't feel my feet hitting the ground. He's going to get us killed this time, I remember thinking before the action itself took over and I was into the game almost as much as he was.

The iron caterpillar was reduced to a crawl, so clambering up the steps of the back of the observation car was no trouble for two nimble youths. The thing that fascinated me was that I could see the people inside watching us, spellbound, I guess, by what appeared to be a prank.

THE VERY MENTION OF THE DREADED TEXAS RANGER SLEDGE HAMMER SET MY INSIDES TO CHURNING. HE PLAYED HUNCHES THAT ALWAYS PAID OFF.

"Stick 'em up," yelled Abner as he gave the door a healthy kick. He seemed momentarily stunned when the door didn't move.

"It opens thisaway," I gestured, and Abner swung it open, repeating his rehearsed line.

No one moved. Life, I have found in my experience of crime, is never like theater. People just don't respond the way they are supposed to. But they can be motivated by determined types such as Abner Butler.

"I said stick 'em up," commanded my partner as he sent a shot through the roof of the car, followed by a well-placed blast through the center light fixture. This got results.

Now, why was I even surprised that his gun was loaded? His promise to me that he would leave all bullets at home should have convinced me that he was lying. But the people began playing their proper roles. One woman, who was absolutely in no danger of sexual assault, even had she been the sole female at the end of a month's deer camp of a dozen men in the Colorado Rockies, shouted "rape" at the top of her lungs, which were considerable.

"Just put your money in this sack and you won't get hurt," I squeaked. The train was gaining speed again, and it was harder to stand up than I thought it would be.

The man nearest me reached into his coat, but I think he was having a heart attack. No money was forthcoming. At the far end of the car, a determined-looking type who turned out to be a railroad detective calmly stood up, pulled a gun from a shoulder holster, and pointed the thing at me. Abner's gun barked and the pistol flew out of the fellow's hand like a shot. Now, this was more like it: just like the movies, at last.

But matters took a turn for the worse. The detective looked game yet. He stood holding his wrist and shaking his numbed member, but he shouted orders. "Rush him, men. He can't shoot all of us." I could see his idea was taking root. A group made a determined advance before Abner nearly blew off the toe of the nearest adversary. After that, it was a Mexican standoff for sure.

The train was really rolling now. We had misjudged everything, for we were nearly to Ivy Switch. Abner made an unmistakable gesture of the head, and I didn't need any more encouragement. I bailed out while he covered me. Just before I made my desperate leap from the car, I heard Abner's pistol speak once more with authority and then click empty again and again.

Hitting the ground sent me tumbling, and as I rolled to a stop I could see Abner, his back wedged against the rail of the platform and his boots against the door. A mass of humanity was pushing somewhat successfully to get at him. I barely had time to point across the way toward Dead Man's Curve, where the engineer would have to slow down again in order to cross the rickety Plum Creek Bridge safely. Abner nodded that he understood, but the train was really moving now and I didn't like the worried look I saw in Abner's eyes.

Running on rubbery legs, I reached the horses, vaulted into the saddle, seized the reins of Abner's horse, and spurred across the gap of land to where the train had to circle. Sure enough, here it came, chugging down to a good twenty mile an hour gait for the loop across the creek. I galloped along the track at a good pace and let the train pass me by, ignoring the engineer's puzzled stare. Counting the cars creeping by me, I realized that I might run out of racetrack and hit the creek myself before Abner could make the jump I knew he would try.

I reined in a little and Abner pulled up beside me. Angry men erupted out the door after him when he levered his legs away, but their force took them backward while Abner made his leap for life to the side just ahead of their clutches.

Abner was a great athlete and a fine horseman, but we had never practiced this stunt, and he hit the saddle half-straddled, bounced over against me, clawed at the air with his free hand, and fell heavily down between the galloping hooves. I heard the train clicking on past me as I whirled around. Angry oaths trailed off behind me as the train and the passengers ground on across the bridge ahead. Abner lay in a crumpled heap. He seemed plastered to the ground.

I thundered back to him, swinging from the saddle as I reined to a stop, but my quaking legs wouldn't hold me up and I collapsed by him. I cannot describe the relief I felt when he raised his head and looked at me with a face full of ground-in sand. He waved me away with a slow sweep of his hand, indicating that he was just trying to regain the breath that had been knocked out of him. Stumbling to his unsteady feet,

ABNER WRAPPED HIS PISTOL IN OUR TWO BANDANNAS, THEN BURIED IT IN THE MESS UNDER THE CHICKEN ROOST IN THE HENHOUSE.

the old Abner returned with a crooked grin.

"How much did we get?" he rasped.

"You know good and well we ain't got nothing but trouble," I muttered back.

"Well, there's going to be a whole lot more of that headed our way soon as that train hits Luling, so let's light out *muy pronto, amigo,*" he said with resignation.

I was back on my horse and already headed back up the tracks when I heard Abner wheezing orders from behind me to ride the other way. I turned to see him reining off toward Plum Creek. He guided his horse down into the creek bottom where, with much spurring, shouting, and lashing with quirts we drove our horses into the deep, treacherous muddy waters of the creek, somehow kept from bogging down permanently, and then by sheer determination willed our mounts up the steep bank on the other side of the fence that ran down into the watercourse itself. Now we were on the huge Walker Brothers' Ranch, with gates and gaps on every cross fence, so we could travel north toward home for several miles before we hit a road again.

With time to think, my mind put my nerves on edge again. "They'll just track us this way," I said.

"No, they won't," Abner replied. "You know they'll put Sledge Hammer on the case, and he'll try to backtrack us first. We'll take precautions thisaway, and we done covered some of our tracks the other way, so we'll be all right."

The very mention of the dreaded Texas Ranger Sledge Hammer set my insides to churning. He had started out trailing cattle thieves on horseback as a teenager in the 1880s. Those same talents he put to use from his Chevrolet coupe when tracking down the transvestite and hermaphrodite psychopaths, Leo and Lode, in 1933. These two perverts had terrorized citizens in their romp across Texas via their Model A Ford in the early stages of the Great Depression. Sledge Hammer ambushed them on a lonely stretch of road right over the Louisiana line, shooting both the odd couple and their Ford so full of holes that neither was serviceable again. Known for both his sharp eye and his unerring instinct, Hammer moved inexorably toward his prey by playing hunches that always paid off. He would surely be put on our trail, and he would definitely find us. I just knew it!

We took the same safeguards on our getaway as we had on our trip to the robbery, easing down heavily used cattle trails so the trudging bovine hooves would cover our shod horses' marks, brushing out our tracks behind us as we rode, and cutting our cow ponies up into ridges of rocky terrain and stunted brush ground cover. When a county road cut across our path, we found a hard spot and traveled a piece up the trackless caliche and gravel before tearing through a fence and taking to the back country again.

But when we stopped on Widow's Peak to let our horses blow, far away on County Road 146, we glimpsed the unmistakable green flash between the trees of the Chevrolet. Hammer was leery of courtrooms because lawyers like Abner became might get the guilty off. *Ley fuga* was Hammer's code, and until Lyndon Johnson provided double jeopardy for law officers with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Hammer's methods worked fine.

"He's on our trail," I gasped.

"Yeah, but he's goin' the wrong way," Abner pointed out, ecstasy in his voice. This was a fun game to him; but a nightmare to me.

We moved on, but every time we topped a rise we paused to scan the landscape for a glimpse of one of the county roads, and frequently we noted dust rising from more travel on those sleepy lanes than was usual. My heart sank at the sight from Wolf Ridge. There at the rural mailboxes at the turn leading to Lockhart or to The Crossroads, sat Sledge Hammer's dusty Chevrolet edged up to Sheriff Branson's county car. The third vehicle had the new, polished look of a federal auto. We could see the tiny figures pointing here and there, but when they roared off in a cloud of dust, Hammer sped in the direction of our village. Branson was always suspicious of us just because Abner was auburn-headed and a preacher's kid, not to mention the fact that my best friend was always up to something and a suspect in a dozen cases of petty theft, mean pranks, and practical jokes usually geared to flout the law if not embarrass an officer sworn to protect the statutes. I was sure Branson had named Abner as a suspect, for Hammer always insisted on following the best lead. Our being guilty as sin might have had something to do with my sense of doom, but there was no chance of our returning to the scene of the crime; I wasn't going to be caught there because I never wanted to see a train again.

"They're on to us," I blurted out.

"YOUR SISTER SAYS YOU BOYS RIDE IDENTICAL SORREL HORSES," SLEDGE HAMMER SAID, "NOT THEM DUN AND BUCKSKIN PLUGS OUT YONDER."

"No, they ain't," Abner said easily. "They're just checkin' all possibilities. But just in case, we better get to the old silver mine before anyone else does, 'cause Rachel is sure to tell that mean, criminal-killin', back-shootin' sonofabuck that that's where we're at."

As usual, Abner had covered up with his acting ability any nervousness he might have had, but the way he spurred off down the dangerous, horse-crippling, and neck-breaking terrain running down from Wolf Ridge told me he agreed with me all the way. I plunged after him, following him into the thick brush where the incline leveled off, dodging the big limbs and knocking the little ones away from my face. We penetrated a veritable mass of vegetation through which we had never passed before. Every now and then there was a noise, then a movement in the heavy cover, followed by a flicker as a white-tailed deer jumped from his hiding place to bound across a little opening before crashing out of sight into the brambles again. I knew that even though we were burdened by worry, Abner was taking mental and geographical notes for our poaching operations the next fall. All I could think of in my panicked state was the horror of missing deer season because of the four walls of a jail cell. Abner led us out onto a public road for a mad dash down a quarter mile stretch that left us wide open had anyone seen us. It was a desperate gamble, made simply because we had to save time. But our horses were blowing pretty hard, and I knew they couldn't keep up the pace Abner was setting.

His plan dawned on me as we cut up the private lane to Deacon Harvey Hillman's small ranch house. Deacon Hillman hadn't missed a Southern Baptist Convention in twenty years. He and his wife would both be gone. It was the Hillmans who gossiped around that Abner should have been called Absalom after King David's wayward son instead of being stuck with the title of Saul's top military officer for his appellation. Had he seen Abner running around his place like he owned it, he would have felt even stronger about the name change. I sensed that Abner was going to swap horses. He went me one better, changing saddles, blankets, and bridles, too. He wrapped his pistol in our two bandannas, then he buried it in the mess under the chicken roost in the henhouse. This brilliant strategy on Abner's part saved the day as events unfolded. It was a simple matter to enter through the gap at the back of the Hillman place before beating a beeline on the fresh mounts to the silver mine, where we unsaddled and hobbled the horses some ways off, just in time to get down into the mine shaft and swing a couple of pick strokes before we heard a car stop in the distance. Then the long, awkward strides of Sledge Hammer stalked ominously toward us through last year's leaves on the sand.

He was even bigger than I had thought, I noticed, when he stuck his beefy jaw into the old mine shaft and squinted at us with his calculating, suspicious eyes. His face was a rugged granite chunk encased in leather; he had a shock of brown hair coming out in front on his forehead from under his stained Stetson hat. The effects of a life spent courting danger marked his whole being, and the personality that thrust forward with his presence was intimidating. Being built more like a bear than a man gave him an added advantage. It was intended to be so. Old-time lawmen developed that take-charge mentality when they came on a scene. His type would always be running the show, and he wanted you to know it.

"You two step out here," he ordered peremptorily. "We need to talk."

"We need to take a break anyway," Abner said in that irritating way he had of expressing more than his words.

"You'll be steppin' out here whether you need a break or not," Hammer shot back as we all three emerged into the sunlight. "You'd be Abner, the smart one, I reckon."

Now I knew Sheriff Branson had definitely sent him. Branson had thought for over a year that Abner had outsmarted him in a couple of petty crimes we had pulled off. Branson was right. And suddenly I didn't like this Texas Ranger whom I had admired for years from afar. Only five years earlier, Abner and I had kept newspaper articles about this very man and talked of becoming members of his distinct law enforcement agency ourselves. But that was before Abner decided that there was more money and fun on the other side of the law, and that people like Sledge Hammer were as dumb as they looked, a myth certainly untrue. However, Hammer was definitely as mean as he appeared; that was painfully obvious to me that hot afternoon.

"You boys finding anything?" Hammer inquired.

"YOU BETTER FIND YOU SOMEONE ELSE TO RUN WITH, BOY," SLEDGE HAMMER SAID. "THIS ONE'S BORN TO HANG."

"No, but we will someday," Abner replied cockily.

"Is that what give you the idea to rob that train?" Hammer drawled.

"Ain't no train out here," Abner said in his insolent way.

"That's why you rode south to the tracks on them horses," Hammer stated matter-of-factly.

He then shuffled bearlike over to our gear, where he contemptuously kicked our saddles over before feeling over our blankets. I could see he was puzzled over the dry state of our borrowed property. He strolled over to the horses and ran a practiced hand over their backs. Clearly he was disconcerted by the evidence. He shambled back to us, rolling a cigarette as he moved. Lighting his smoke, he ran a suspicious eye over us. He puffed in silence for some time.

"Your sister says you boys ride identical sorrel horses," he finally stated casually, "instead of them dun and buckskin plugs out yonder." He jerked his beefy head toward our traded animals.

"You know how women are about things like that," I said as lightly as I could manage. "She don't even know the difference between a coon dog and a bloodhound," I added, wishing I had said bird dog instead of that dreaded creature used to run down criminals. Yet Sledge Hammer seemed to accept my explanation, for he changed the set of his head and the gears seemed to mesh comfortably in his suspicious mind for the first time since he arrived.

"We really don't know what's goin' on here," Abner lied with an easy elegance, "but near as I can figger, someone done somethin', and someone else done told you that we done it, which is a lie, especially if that someone is the same one that always lays everything that happens on us. Namely Sheriff Branson, the biggest liar and crook in the county."

"I'd be mighty careful about makin' accusations about the law," Hammer said hotly.

"Well, this county's dry as a bone," Abner stated matter-of-factly, "and Branson takes bribes from every bootlegger in the state to let them sell out of the back end of their cars." Here Abner bordered on the truth. Sheriff Branson did have a bootlegging deal with his brother-in-law, but he didn't allow anyone else to peddle liquor, even if they did offer him a kickback.

"Then it's your duty to step forward and make a formal complaint," Hammer said. "Then the higher-ups can do something."

"The higher-ups," Abner said with a snort and an impudent glance at Sledge Hammer, "is too busy bothering children and follow in' false leads that any Boy Scout would ignore to do anything about crime in their own backyards. But if you'll excuse us, I got some more diggin' to do."

All of the legends about the quickness and temper of this famous Texas Ranger materialized immediately as Abner turned to stroll back into the old mine. Hammer's left hand swung my partner around to catch the powerful blow of the right coming around to meet his attractive face with a slap that sent my best friend sprawling into the rocks at the mine entrance—which was pretty much what Abner was asking for. And they didn't call that Ranger Sledge for nothing, I can testify to that.

Abner's act was so convincing that he had me fooled for a time. First he drew himself up into a fetal position. Then he went into a set of quivers and shakes. Next he began to slobber and gag like he was swallowing his tongue. The blood from his split lip plus the dark stain spreading on the back of his head added real color to the drama.

"He's gonna die! He's gonna die!" I screamed.

"No, he ain't," Hammer snorted. "I've brought a lot more back to life worse off than him during questioning." But I thought I detected a little worry in Hammer's usual deadpan expression.

"But this suspect's father's the one that prays for the governor on the speaker's stand every inauguration day," I said with emphasis. I could see the wheels turning in Hammer's shrewd countenance and bearing as he made the connection in his one-track mind about Abner Butler and the Reverend Dr. Butler, current Lone Star preacher of fame and clout among Southern Baptists. Ironically, this usually worked against Abner who, it was said, was drawn to sin like all preacher's kids, but this time the connection was proving positive—positive from our standpoint, of course, of covering our dirty tracks. "I better run and get his parents," I added.

"You just stay right where you're at," Hammer commanded. He picked Abner up by his ankles, shook him up and down a couple of jerks, and then propped him up against a dirt pile. Meanwhile, Abner was faking a pretty good recovery, based largely on the moving pictures we had seen.

"Unfortunately, he's goin' to live, which is too bad, cause this

type will come to no good end," Hammer predicted.

"I'll outlive you," mumbled Abner.

Hammer drew back to hit him again, thought better of it, and gave him a good shake. "You two listen to me," he said, and he meant it. "I know you done it. I just ain't figgered out how yet. And if you wasn't who you are, I'd get the details out of you in short order. But as things stand, I'm goin' to let it go. You two know you done it, and you know I know you done it, and I know your types will mess up down the road, and I'll get another crack at you under different circumstances. You ain't near as smart as you think. But for now, for this time, you two just forget this little interview we had, and I'll forget the tip I had on you two. Just tell your folks you fell in these here rocks."

"I don't know. We'll have to think about it," Abner mumbled before I could speak.

"Thank you, Sledge, I mean Mr. Hammer, sir," I stammered.

At that point, Abner and Hammer glared at each other with a hatred terrible to see. Their eyes fixed on each other for a long time before Sledge turned to me.

"You better find you someone else to run with, boy," he said. "This one's born to hang," he closed with a jerk of the thumb toward Abner. Then he stalked and stomped off through the trees.

Abner was a little wobbly for a time, and I took this opportunity, as we rode home from the mine, to jump him about the bullets in his gun. He had promised faithfully to brandish only an empty revolver.

"Yeah, and if I had you'd be dead now," he shot back, "'cause that sonofabuck was fixin' to gut-shoot you for sure. You ought to thank me."

"Well," I said, "at least you shot the gun out of his hand, just like in the picture shows. How'd you do that?"

"It was easy," came Abner's relaxed answer. And for once he told the truth, but it sent a shudder through my frame. "I just aimed at the fool's heart and missed."

The fierce streak of recklessness in his behavior marked him for as long as I knew him. Thank God we didn't kill anybody, I thought. But I could not really relax about the matter the way Abner did. I could only hope that it would blow over.

And this proved the last we heard of it from the authorities. Since Rachel had been with her forbidden Bohemian boyfriend when Hammer questioned her, she never said anything to Brother Butler. But I think it still wouldn't have ended had not two copycat thieves slicked the tracks halfway between San Antonio and Uvalde and made off with a good deal of money. These two enterprising outlaws left a trail of cut fences all the way to Laredo, where they sold their horses before walking across the international bridge into the oblivion of northern Mexico. They took the heat off us, bless their rotten hides, wherever they are.

Abner wore the new scar on his face with the pride of a German beer hall dueler. Besides, Abner was so handsome that scars seemed to give him a distinction rather than a distracting mark.

Even Abner felt we should lie low for awhile after the train episode, but he was never still for long. And even though every boy growing up in the South has a right to be reckless at times, Abner abused the privilege. Spring had barely turned into summer, and school had just let out when we had earned enough honest money by working cattle at the auction to attend a picture show in Waelder.

"You know," Abner said as we rocked along in our saddles toward home in the late afternoon heat, "all this has set me to thinkin' about somethin'."

I knew we were heading for trouble again.

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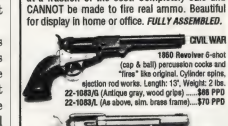

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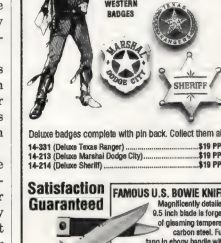

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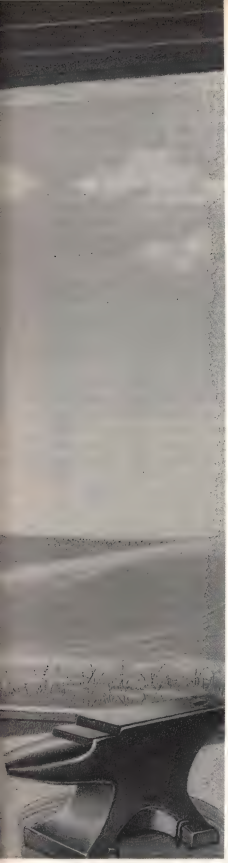

Apache

We never knew where the old Apache came from, or even what his name was. He just came down out of the hills one day, driving a buckboard pulled by an old dun gelding.

He unhitched the horse, hobbled him, and turned him out to graze. Then he came in the shed where my dad did his blacksmithing, sat down with his back against a post, and watched like he was plain fascinated with the whole business–how my dad could make anything out of a piece of hot iron, tapping away on it, shaping it, then dunking it in the big trough to cool before heating and shaping it again.

From then on the Indian came every day, usually about midmorning. He'd turn the dun out and then sit without moving until the sun touched the tops of the Dragoons. Then he'd get up, catch the horse, and drive off up the canyon that twisted through the mountains like a thread nobody had ever followed to the end–a maze of washes and side canyons a thousand Indians could have lived or hidden in.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE BECK

It's been fifty years, but I can remember that time like it was yesterday—the sound of iron hissing as it hit water, the tap-tap of dad's hammer like one of those pesky woodpeckers that tries to hide acorns in a tin roof, the horses stomping flies and swishing their tails, and the wind singing around the corners of sheds and in the wire fence around the corral.

In my mind it seems it was always summer, the shade of the shed welcome after the glare of sun on scrub and sand. Summer, and the thunderheads building on top of the mountains till they got so full up they just burst open and rained on us; my ma's chickens running for cover, and the barn cats holed up nice and dry, and the horses snorty because they love a good soaking.

Out here, after a rain, the air's as sweet as wood smoke, a scent that always stops me in my tracks, makes me sniff the wind like an old hound. There's that sweetness, and the tang of creosote, and something like flowers blooming far off—flowers that have no name, or at least none I ever heard.

Anyway, that's how I remember that time—the old Apache, and me helping my dad when I wasn't out hoeing the corn, which ripened fast in that weather and rustled in the wind. It was a good sound, meaning food on the table, fat hogs and horses, and hard times licked for another year.

The funny thing was, that old Apache never talked. Not one word. He'd grunt sometimes, but that was all we ever got out of him.

"Maybe he can't talk," I said to my dad once.

And he said, "More likely he just don't want to."

"What's he come for then?" I wondered.

My dad shrugged. "Maybe he's lonesome. Wants company. We'll prob'ly never find out. Or we'll find out if he ever feels like talking. So we'll let him be. He don't do no harm that I can see."

The old Apache never talked. Not one word. He'd grunt sometimes, but that was all we ever got out of him.

After awhile we got so used to him being there we only noticed him on the days he didn't come, when it was like something was missing or out of order.

My dad formed the habit of talking to that old man while he worked, figuring he could understand even if he didn't speak, and I got used to the sound of his voice explaining things I already knew from being there since I was old enough to be trusted around the fire and the forge and the big ranch horses.

"See, Chief, it's this way." My dad always called the old guy "Chief," and he'd be talking around a mouthful of nails he was using to shoe. "This critter's got feet the size of pie pans. Uses as much iron as two reg'lar horses. And one front hoof's crooked. Got to allow for that. You saw how I did it, I reckon. Hammered till it fits like he was born with it."

And the Indian would sit there listening, watching, enjoying being around people who accepted him, took him for granted.

After a time, my ma took to bringing his lunch along with ours, and he liked that. He'd sit there and chew and smack his lips, and nod his thanks to ma, who said he was the politest and the cleanest Indian she knew. And that was true. His shirts always looked like they'd been boiled and then bleached in the sun, and his hair was in two neat braids tied at the ends with leather thongs. All in all he was a dignified old man, even with that black stovepipe hat he never took off, which would've looked plain foolish on anybody else.

Now, it's a funny thing how, soon as you get used to something, it changes and you got to change with it, else life passes you by and you're lost in a world that don't exist anymore.

Writing that makes me wonder if the Chief wasn't trying to make sense out of *his* world that had changed right under his nose—that whole way of life gone with the white men, the army, the long-drawn-out war that ended when Geronimo was captured.

I guess the old man knew my family had always been friendly with the Indians. We gave them food when we could spare it, and we left them alone, and they left us alone as a result. So he figured he could trust us when he started coming, and for a while we shared that trust and those long summer days.

But three cowboys gone bad—or maybe no good to begin with—changed everybody's life. Hard cases run out of Texas they were—small-minded, greedy, and mean as two buckets of rattlesnakes.

They were good hands, though. Had themselves jobs with the Rafter O, and if they were stealing dogies on the side, nobody could prove it, though there was a lot of talk about the number of cows without calves that year.

The three of them—Ty Beaudry, Luke Pierce, and Jim Hightower—had a nice string of horses they kept fed up and in good traveling shape.

New device turns any electrical outlet into a phone jack

Engineering breakthrough gives you unlimited phone extensions without wires or expensive installation fees

By Charles Anton

You don't have to have a teenager to appreciate having extra phone jacks. Almost everyone wishes they had more phone jacks around the house.

When I decided to put an office in my home, I called the phone company to find out how much it would cost to add extra phone jacks. Would you believe it was $158?

No more excuses. Today, there are a thousand reasons to get an extra phone jack and a thousand excuses not to get one. Now an engineering breakthrough allows you to add a jack anywhere you have an electrical outlet. Without the hassle. Without the expense. And without the miles of wires.

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Just plug the transmitter into a phone jack and an electrical outlet. You can then insert a receiver into any outlet anywhere in your house. You'll be able to move your phone to rooms or areas that have never had jacks before.

Clear reception at any distance. The Wireless Phone Jack uses your home's existing electrical wiring to transmit signals. This gives you sound quality that far exceeds cordless phones. It even exceeds the quality of previous devices. In fact, the Wireless Phone Jack has ten times the power of its predecessor.

Your range extends as far as you have electrical outlets: five feet or five hundred feet. If you have an outlet, you can turn it into a phone jack—no matter how far away it is. The Wireless Phone Jack's advanced companding noise reduction features guarantee you crystal-clear reception throughout even the largest home.

Privacy guarantee. You can use The Wireless Phone Jack in any electrical outlet in or around your home, even if it's on a different circuit than the transmitter. Each Wireless Phone Jack uses one of 65,000 different security codes. You can be assured that only your receiver will be able to pick up transmissions from your transmitter.

Is the Wireless Phone Jack right for you?

The Wireless Phone Jack works with any single-line phone device. Almost anyone could use it, especially if…

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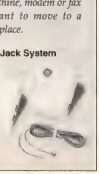
Other phone devices. *You have an answering machine, modem or fax machine you want to move to a more convenient place.*

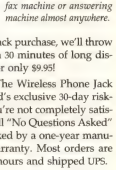
The Wireless Phone Jack System consists of a transmitter (right) and a receiver (left). One transmitter will operate an unlimited number of receivers.



Unlimited extensions—no monthly charge. Most phone lines can only handle up to five extensions with regular phone jacks. Not with the Wireless Phone Jack. All you need is one transmitter, and you can add as many receivers as you want. Six, ten, there's no limit. And with the Wireless Phone Jack, you'll never get a monthly charge for the extra receivers.

Works with any phone device. This breakthrough technology will fulfill all of your single-line phone needs. It has a special digital interface for use with your fax machine or modem. You can even use it with your answering machine just by plugging it into the Wireless Phone Jack receiver.

Special factory-direct offer. To introduce this new technology, we are offering a special factory-direct package. For a limited time, the transmitter is only $49. One transmitter works an unlimited number of receivers priced at $49 for the first one and $39 for each additional receiver. Plus, with any Wireless Phone Jack purchase, we'll throw in a phone card with 30 minutes of long distance (a $30 value) for only $9.95!



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"Bet they don't have papers on a one of them horses," my dad said after he'd shod a couple and listened to the boys' boasting.

"You mean they stole them?" I asked.

"That's just what I mean. Those three are trouble, plain and simple. You wait and see."

I didn't have to wait long.

The doings of those cowboys were the talk of the county. Nothing too bad at first, just high spirits like a lot of hands had. They shot out the windows of the saloon on their day off and spent a night in jail. Then Ty Beaudry won a bunch of money at poker so it almost seemed he was cheating, except nobody had the guts to call him on it, him packing a big .45 pistol and able to use it. And then Jim Hightower run off with the daughter of a traveling preacher, but she got scared before they'd gone a mile and went running back to her daddy. Folks thought Jim should get a good whopping for that one, but he talked his way out of it, saying he'd seen the light and got saved, and the preacher believed him and baptized him then and there in Cottonwood Wash, which was running bank full on account of the rain.

Jim come up cussing and got a sermon on sinful language from the preacher, but he was still hopping mad because his new boots had got ruined. Personally, I didn't think getting baptized had done much for him or for his disposition.

Those boys, every one of 'em, was a dandy. They dressed fit to kill, hoping to get the attention of the ladies. Old Ty always wore a red silk scarf and a pair of fringed and studded gauntlets. Had him a pair of fancy chaps, too, the kind with conchos on 'em, and he used big, Mexican-style spurs that jangled every time he took a step.

"Mean," my dad said about those spurs. "Anybody'd use them on a horse ought to get a taste of their own medicine."

I remember all this because it seems Ty was always coming to the shop to get my dad to fix something—a busted bit or bridle, or shoes for one of his critters, a job he should have done himself. Any cowboy knows how to shoe.

Anyhow, he'd show up like a bad penny and stand around saying smart aleck things to me and the Indian, who never moved a muscle, even when Ty got to showing his mean streak, like the day that started it all.

"Hell, old man! Cat got your tongue?" He walked over to the Chief and stood over him, slapping those fancy gauntlets in the palm of one big hand. "Maybe you're dead. Stuffed. One of them statues outside a cigar store."

Ty Beaudry was a dandy. He always wore a red silk scarf and a pair of fringed and studded gauntlets. Had a pair of fancy chaps, too.

When the old man didn't answer, Ty called over his shoulder to my dad. "He your mascot or something? Ain't you scared he'll get your scalp someday?"

"Leave him be," my dad said. "He's not bothering you. Nor nobody else, either."

"That's just it. Settin' here like an old toad. I want to see him hop. Can you hop, old man? Can you do a war dance?"

He prodded the Chief's moccasins with the toe of his boot, then said, "I swear, he's up and died on us. Well, good riddance. Only good Injun's a dead one."

"I told you. Leave him be." My dad was long on patience, but he was getting riled. I could tell by the way his eyes had turned the color of gun metal. He had his hands full right then, working on the horse's hind leg, the shoe half nailed on, or he might've taken Ty and thrown him out.

He had a bucket filled with some chemical, I don't recall what, maybe never knew the name, but he could dip his hand in that stuff and then carry a hot piece of metal a ways without getting burned. I knew it. So did the Chief. We'd seen my dad do it near every day, and never thought nothing about it.

But Ty, he saw my dad carrying a hot shoe, and he started in laughing.

"You see that?" he said to the Indian. "You see that? I bet you can't do it. Carry that hot iron. I bet that'd wake you up quick. I bet you five dollars."

Something dangerous flickered in the Chief's dark eyes. I saw it, and I got scared. I mean, I thought back to all the stories about Indians and how they tortured people—burying them in ant hills and stuff—and I backed off in a corner and stayed there watching while the old man got up, not saying anything, with that look on his face that spelled trouble.

He looked ten feet tall when he walked over to the forge where my dad had just laid out a piece of iron to get shaped; ten feet tall, and quiet on his feet, and mad, like he'd swallowed all the insults he was going to take.

I wouldn't have been surprised to see him smash Ty in the face with that hot shoe. In fact, I'd have been glad. But that's not

what he did. No, sir. What he did was to pick up that metal in his bare hand and walk back to Ty, carrying it.

I could smell his skin burning. Seems like I even heard it—sizzling like pork fat—and I clamped my jaws shut so's I wouldn't get sick or cry.

I wanted to punch Ty Beaudry till he yelled for mercy, brand him with a poker heated red-hot, but something in the look on the Indian's face kept me sitting. Waiting.

The look he gave Ty when he dropped that iron on one of them fancy boots and then held out his hand—burnt black and blistered—would've killed any decent person.

I never saw hate on anybody's face before that, and never again as far as I know, but I sure recognized it. And I got a chill that ran right down my back. Ty was through. I knew it. The Chief knew it. Only Ty was dumb enough to think he'd gotten away with something.

He was staring at the Chief's hand like he wished he didn't have to, and I didn't blame him. Finally he dug in his pocket and pulled out five dollars and tucked it in the old man's belt.

"Reckon I lost," was all he said.

My dad turned to me. "Go get your ma. Tell her to bring down some of that salve of hers, and hurry."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

Ma came down running. She was as good a doctor as if she'd studied for it, always helping neighbors with broken bones and babies and stuff. She also had a sharp tongue in her head, and she used it to scold us while she worked.

"Men!" she said. "Bunch of babies, if you ask me. Egging each other on. Doin' damn fool things. You all ought to be ashamed. You, too, Chief. It's pride is what it is. And pride cometh before a fall. Next thing, you'll be darin' each other to jump off that mountain out there."

Then she turned on Ty, who was standing stock-still and looking kind of dazed.

"And you! Pickin' on a harmless old man. Your ma should've taken a stick to you when you were little. Too late now, I reckon. The harm's done. But if I ever hear about you bullyin' somebody again, I'll whup you myself, fancy duds and all. And you can count on it."

Leila showed up hysterical at the sheriff's office—she said someone had broken into her father's store late the night before.

I had to turn around so's nobody could see me laughing. I'd been on the wrong end of Ma's tongue myself, and to see Ty there, meek as a lamb and taking it, seemed like justice to me.

We sent the Chief off home, me hitching up his horse, and Ma giving him orders to keep his hand salved and bandaged. Ty took his horse and rode off without saying anything. I figured it was over and done with. I figured wrong, of course. The old man was Apache. He never forgot. Or forgave, either.

He didn't show up at our place for so long, I got worried. I missed him—silence and all. "You think he's all right?" I asked Dad. "You think he got better?"

"I bet he's fine," my dad said. "He's tough, and he's prob'ly got herbs and stuff we don't know about. He'll show up one day. Wait and see."

We got in the harvest, gathered our cattle, and then it was time for me to go back to school, which I sure hated. What good was school after a summer of freedom and excitement? I spent a lot of days looking out the window and dreaming, wishing for something to happen, but when it did, I never figured I'd play a big part in the action.

A man named Macaddam had a general store down on the main north-south road. He did a good business, too, since he stocked everything anybody needed, from nails to needles. After the fall roundup, he was flush because folks had money to spend and bought what they'd done without the rest of the year.

Macaddam had a daughter named Leila; cute as a kitten, yellow-headed, and lots of fun. Every boy for fifty miles was courting her, or trying to, but she refused to make up her mind, paying attention first to one and then another, and driving them all loco, even the Texas cowboys, who had to stand in line with the rest.

One morning after a hen-drowning fall rain, Leila showed up hysterical at the sheriff's office. She was soaking wet, mud-covered, and had bruises on her arms, and the story she told, when they'd calmed her down enough to tell it, was a strange one.

Someone had broken into her father's store late the night before. They'd busted open the safe and taken the money, but while they were at it they had made so much noise that her father had gone downstairs to check.

She heard voices, then shots. Taking a pistol she went down to see for herself what was happen-

ing. At the door to the store, a man grabbed her from behind. She fought, but wasn't strong enough to do much but struggle. In the end he knocked her out and left her lying on the floor. She hadn't seen his face in the dark hall, but she thought he sounded like Jim Hightower.

When she came to, she lit a lamp and went into the store. All she found was the empty safe and blood on the floor. Of her father there wasn't a sign.

The sheriff turned Leila over to his wife and organized a posse that came dragging back empty-handed two days later. The rain on the night of the break-in had washed away any tracks, and a search hadn't turned up Macaddam. They'd questioned the cowboys, Hightower especially, and they all swore up and down they'd been snug in the bunkhouse that night, playing cards.

The sheriff stopped by our place on his way back to town. "Keep your eyes open," he told us. "Macaddam could be anyplace out here, dead or alive. But till we know, there's not much we can do. All we've got is Leila's story and that busted safe. That and the blood. But no body. Hell, maybe the old boy robbed himself and took off for Frisco! If she was my daughter, I'd be tempted to do the same."

My dad shook his head. "Leila's a flighty gal and no mistake, but she's not lyin'. Somebody got the old man and his money. But don't worry. We'll keep an ear out."

"Who do you think did it?" I asked.

"I got my suspicions, is all," he said, frowning. "Can't prove a thing. Now, go get your chores done."

Nothing I hated more than chores; the same ones every day. I could've done them in my sleep. What I really wanted to do was take my pony and go out and look for evidence. It riled me that Ma kept me chopping wood that day and the next so I couldn't get away. Grown-ups sure had the knack of spoiling a boy's fun.

> Ty Beaudry rode in, and one look told me he was leaving the country. Everything he owned was packed on his horse.

A few days later, we all got woke up by a pounding at the door and a voice yelling for Ma. A neighbor woman's time had come and, like I said, Ma was always called to help with birthing.

When the chips were down she could move faster than anybody I ever saw, and I remember how she got the rest of us moving, too.

"Dan! Hitch the wagon!" To my dad.

And to me, "Will! See your sister eats all her breakfast. The biscuits are in the oven, and don't you leave the place till we get back. You hear?"

I wouldn't have dared to go off and have her come home and find my sister alone. I was more scared of Ma than I'd ever been of Indians or outlaws, and she knew it.

So after she and Dad left, I made sure little Sara cleaned her plate, and then the kitchen, too. That was girl's work, for sure. I forked some hay into the horse yard and then walked up the hill to the shed, figuring maybe the Chief would pick that morning to come back and be sorry to find nobody there.

It was still early. In the west, the Dragoons were colored pink and tawny, and I stopped a minute to look at them and wonder at how they were never the same from one minute to the next, changing shape and color so it seemed they were alive, like animals, or even people.

I stood and watched and listened to the quiet. Seems even the birds weren't singing, and the wind was calm. Then from the south came the sound of a horse trotting—a good, no-nonsense trot, the gait you use when you want to cover ground without wearing out your horse.

A few minutes later Ty Beaudry rode in, and one look told me he was leaving the country. Everything he owned was packed on that horse.

"Where's your dad?" he asked, swinging down.

"He's not here."

"Where in hell is he?"

"Took Ma down to Wright's for a birthing."

Ty was as jumpy as a drop of water in a hot frying pan, and I watched him, wondering where he'd jump next.

"How long'll that take?" he wanted to know.

I kind of laughed at that one. The way I saw it, babies took anywhere from an hour to two days to come into the world. I shrugged.

"Reb's front shoe's come loose," he said then. "Reckon I'll have to borrow some tools."

"Go ahead," I said, kind of hoping he'd botch the job and make a fool out of himself.

He didn't, though. He found the hammer and the nails, cross-tied the horse, and set to work.

"Where you headed?" I asked him.

"None of your business," he said around the nails in his mouth. "You're a nosy brat, and no mistake."

"I was just being polite," I said.

"Shut up, then. Kids're supposed to be seen and not heard.

That ma of yours ever tell you that?"

I nodded. She had for a fact.

He finished the shoe, checked the others, then straightened up and threw the hammer at me without warning. "Catch!" he yelled.

I ducked just in time.

"Gotta be fast, kid," he advised. "Gotta be a step ahead of the rest or you'll get nailed. Take it from me."

I didn't say anything. I was too mad, and he knew it.

He untied the horse and led him outside, grinning as he went. When he stepped into the saddle he laughed—a dry kind of sound, like he'd forgot how to do it.

"Tell you somethin' else, kid," he said. "If I was you, and nosy, I'd go look in my old man's dry well. Yessirree, that's what I'd do." Then he spurred his horse and they took off, kicking dust and stones back in my face.

He headed up the canyon. If he'd been nicer, I might have told him that the trail led to nowhere, or at least not to anyplace he wanted to go, but as it was, I just stood there quiet and thinking about what he'd said.

That old well had been dry for years. It was covered up and we never gave it a thought from one year to the next, so it was funny, him bringing it to my attention. I ran back to the house and grabbed Sara who, being little and a girl, didn't take kindly to being hauled off by me. She squealed like a calf.

"Hush up!" I told her. "We're goin' hunting."

"I'll tell!" she yelled, and screwed up her face like she was going to bawl.

Her telling wasn't going to make any difference if what I figured was true, so I just dragged her across the yard and down into the south pasture where the old well was.

We found Macaddam shoved head first into that hole, and he

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was stone cold dead—had been for a while, and he wasn't a pretty sight.

Sara had nightmares for a month over it, but not me. I was a hero for all of a week.

A posse took out after Ty—and after Hightower and Pierce, too. Seems like they'd split the money and gone their separate ways. They found Hightower headed for Mexico, and picked up Pierce at the railroad station in Benson.

But they never found Ty Beaudry. His horse come in to our place a few days later minus his gear, but we never found hide nor hair of Ty.

Hightower and Pierce confessed to the robbery, but blamed Beaudry for the killing, which didn't do them much good—they got hanged as accomplices anyhow.

> Folks said Leila would come to no good in the city, but I always believed she found what she'd been looking for.

The sheriff gave the money back to Leila who, without saying a word, sold the store and took off on the train for Frisco, leaving a string of broken hearts behind. Folks said she'd come to no good in the city, but I always believed she found what she'd been looking for.

After awhile the excitement died down, and the talk stopped, and winter came, and then spring, with a big calf crop.

"Reckon by now folks have figured out what them boys was up to," my dad said. "Stealin' us blind."

"You think Ty's alive someplace?" I wondered. "You think he got away?"

"Nope," he said. "I don't."

"How come?"

"I just got a feelin'. Let's wait and see."

Seems like he was always saying that—and with some reason all his own.

Well, it was on one of those warm spring days when you look out and see that the buzzards have come back from wherever they go in winter, when I saw the Chief driving down out of the hills, still with the same rickety wagon and the dun horse.

"He's back!" I yelled and ran out to meet him, feeling like the world had come right again.

"Hey!" I said to him. "Hey."

That old man looked straight at me, and I swear his eyes were twinkling when he raised up his right hand, the one he'd burned, and on it, fancy as ever, was one of Ty's gauntlets, fringe and all.

Right then I knew what had happened; knew it as sure as I was standing there on two legs. Somewhere up in those mountains was a grave, and Ty was in it.

Now, those hills are big, with places in them most folks never even seen, and they don't talk any more than the old Apache ever did, but keep their secrets locked up tight.

It was like Dad said. The Chief was an Indian, and he never forgot.

When his chance for revenge came, someplace empty and far away, in one of those side canyons going nowhere, he took it.

I looked square into that old face, those dark eyes that had a glint in them, and I smiled.

"We sure been missing you, Chief," was all I said.

the Left Hand of the Law

Jimmy Taggart's facial muscles twitched sympathetically at each stroke of the straight razor. Teelerville had only one barber, and most of the adult male populace of that west Kansas community sat in Rudy Vasquez's chair for a shave at some time during the year. Taggart was one of the few who did not. To pass the quarter hour until the Lady Luck Saloon opened that Friday morning, he had stopped outside Vasquez's Tonsorial Palace window to watch Rudy's dexterity with a blade applied to another townsman's face.

"Gonna get a shave?" Taggart jumped at the sound of Town Marshal Rod Eilers's voice just behind him. A head taller and twenty pounds heavier than Jimmy, he could sneak around in his much-repaired, low-heeled cavalry boots as quietly as snow falls.

"Naw." He rubbed his left hand over the uneven stubble on his jaw. "I trim it close with scissors ever' few days. Scissors is about all I can handle," the shorter man added, giving his right shirtsleeve a glance. It was folded up precisely and pinned in place. "Cheaper'n Vasquez, too, Cap'n."

Robert P. Jordan

The marshal looked away from the flashing blade and watched Taggart lick his lips the way he had seen many men do when they thought of liquor. "Savin' your pension for better things? Whiskey and women, maybe?"

Taggart snorted derisively. "What

"I saw what you can do when you took that Reb artillery battery. You got the craw to hold the job," the marshal said.

woman would want a one-armed man who can't do a man's work?"

"The Widow Bass down at Logan's general store asks after you." Over the last several months, Theresa Bass had wrung from the marshal every bit of information concerning Taggart that was decent to tell a woman. "Only takes one arm to hold a woman, Jimmy."

"Now, you take liquor, Cap'n. It don't care if you've lost an arm or leg or what have you." He licked his lips again. "I'd best be movin' on."

"Yeah. The Lady Luck'll be open 'bout now." Eilers's voice dripped with sarcasm, and he felt ashamed as soon as the words came out. When Taggart, head bowed, began to shuffle away, the marshal called out, "Tim Forster is leavin' town to go back to Joplin. We'll need a new night jailer. Job's yours if'n you want it."

Taggart halted, cocking his head as if unsure of what he had heard. His slouch hat shielded his expression from the lawman. "Me, Cap'n?"

"I saw what you can do back in 'sixty-four when you charged Lovings Hill and took that Reb artillery battery. You got the craw to hold the job, Jimmy. Better'n drinkin' away that little gov'ment wound pension till you pass out one day and never wake up."

"That charge was o'er ten years ago, Cap'n. I was just followin' some young fool cavalry officer by the name of Eilers. That's all." Tipping his head back, Taggart gave the marshal a grin before heading toward the Lady Luck. He walked like a stove-in man twenty years older than his thirty-five.

Eilers turned his attention back to Vasquez who, aware of the tiny audience outside the Tonsorial Palace window, added a flourish to each stroke of the blade. The marshal shook his head. He just couldn't be that wrong about the man he had once commanded. Sergeant James Lucius Taggart was not a sloven or a coward. The erstwhile horse soldier's sour humor and self-neglect were born of something deeper than losing an arm in a skirmish that historians would probably never record.

Jimmy curled his hand around the half-empty shot glass resting atop the pockmarked table. His first drink had tasted harsh and grainy, causing bile to rise to his throat. But the second glass before him was going down smooth and warm, steadying his nerves the way whiskey ought. With no one to talk to, and no inclination to do so, Jimmy sat and brooded over old wounds, both physical and emotional.

When he had been invalided out of the army and sent home to Xenia, Ohio, in the fall of 1864, he had drunk for medicinal purposes to help himself through the pain from an arm that no longer existed. Unable to do the manual labor he was trained to do before the war—the cutting, molding, and sewing of heavy leather—Jimmy had taken his mother's place as bookkeeper in his father's harness shop. He sought the alcohol-induced numbness at night after work, often alone, but never to excess.

While he adapted to his new work, he also had thrust upon him the mantle of victorious knight returning home maimed from battle. And because he was neat and polite, people said he "wore his wound well." His gentlemanly deportment and manly bearing soon captured the fancy of many eligible ladies in Xenia. From a covey of admirers he chose to court Maggie Brower, daughter of the richest grange owner in the region between the Caesar and Little Miami rivers.

Had the war lasted beyond the spring of 1865, Taggart might well have gotten Maggie to the altar by Christmastide of that year, as she had promised him. But with Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, men began to trickle back to their hometowns, including Xenia. One of these was the handsome, strapping Brevet Major George T. Morgan, 24th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, who returned unscathed. The best that could be said of the unimaginative and shallow-thinking officer was that he was lucky. He had survived three bloody years of fighting, rising from private soldier to temporary rank of major while most around him fell in battle or from disease.

Morgan's luck continued at home when he quickly displaced Taggart as the idol of Xenia's young ladies, including Miss Maggie Brower. So, instead of Jimmy on her arm when she left the marriage altar in December, it was George Morgan. Jimmy grieved over it for months. Goaded by his father to go back out into society, he showed up the following year at Xenia's Fourth of July dance, as most veterans did, resplendent in his uniform. But by then, the belles of that fair city had able-bodied men to pursue, and all his requests to dance were summarily

refused, often accompanied by accusatory looks at his empty sleeve. No woman would dare make a spectacle of herself by dancing with a one-armed man. Remaining only long enough to retain some dignity, Jimmy retreated to his rooms to finish off the bottle of bourbon he kept to ward off the rare recurrences of pain from the phantom arm. But this time the pain was not physical. A month later, he rode out of Xenia. Over the next few years he slowly drifted west, supporting himself doing odd jobs until his disability pension voucher could be forwarded.

Jimmy sipped the remainder of his drink and fished coins from his vest pocket. Spreading them out on the table, he pondered spending more on another drink. His pension voucher was overdue again, and he had enough money for two days of moderate drinking and little else. If the Methodist minister and his wife had not seen fit to give him a daily meal and a sleeping room set off from the rest of the parsonage in exchange for doing light work around the church, he would starve, sleeping in the mud like most town drunks.

"Town drunk," he whispered in disgust. He had descended far since that fleeting moment of glory at Lovings Hill. The day after, sitting his horse in a quiet area behind the lines, a Reb sharpshooter's minié ball shattered his right arm. Afterward, as he passed in and out of consciousness, Taggart could remember only one clear image—Captain Roderick Eilers, tears streaming down his face, kneeling beside him.

Several years after he began the odyssey that brought him to Kansas, Jimmy read a florid account in the *Topeka Gazette* regarding the capture of three ne'er-do-wells by the Teelerville town marshal, Rod Eilers. Taggart saddled up his ancient, raw-boned mare and headed west to see if the lawman and his old commanding officer were the same man. He was.

In the two years since his arrival in Teelerville, Jimmy had held a succession of jobs secured through Eilers's influence. He had lost each, fired because of drinking or his physical inability to do the work. One compounded the other, and with each failure, he felt he had disappointed his brother-in-arms.

Taggart grimaced at the thought that Eilers still believed enough in him to offer him a responsible job. The acute shame of his downfall as a man made him long for another drink, but he refrained should his voucher not soon arrive. Sliding the money to the table's edge, he expertly thumbed each coin into his palm and pocketed them. Ignoring the bartender's astonished look, he left the Lady Luck.

The church needed cleaning before Sunday, and Jimmy had nothing better to do. Walking lethargically, he paid scant attention to what lay in his path. As he reached the front door to Logan's general store, Theresa Bass exited to deliver a special order to the town's dressmaker. Taggart felt her soft, lithe body press abruptly against his when they collided. After a moment's speechless shock, he jumped to collect the packages she had dropped to the wooden walk.

"Beg your pardon, Miz Bass," he mumbled, trying to keep the liquor on his breath away from her. Blushing, he realized that she and Eilers were the only people in town from whom he still cared to hide his weakness for the bottle.

Two years his junior, the widow stood an inch taller than Jimmy. "Quite all right." A smile creased her unadorned, winsome face. Hugging the parcels to herself, she said, "How long have we known each other?"

"Oh, I noticed you the day I arrived in Teelerville, ma'am. You were still in mournin' over your late husband. But to speak to you . . . maybe a year or so."

"Then I insist you call me by my Christian name. You do know what it is, don't you?"

"It's Theresa, ma'am."

"Well, James, it seems I have to take the initiative. You avoid me, and I want to know why."

"Decent women want nothin' to do with me." Taggart was surprised to hear that painful self-assessment flow so easily from his lips.

"I think not, James. I'd like you to come 'round my house for supper this Sunday at one o'clock. I won't take no for an answer," she stated with determination and a warm smile.

When he opened his mouth to reply, the boom of a large caliber revolver sounded from around the corner where the Farmers' Commercial Bank was located. In an instant, Jimmy had his arm around the widow's waist and pulled her into the relative safety of the store.

As Jimmy reached the door to the general store, he collided with Theresa Bass. He jumped to collect the packages she'd dropped.

Ducking down behind bolts of cloth, they heard other guns reply to the first while the screams of frightened horses added to the growing cacophony.

"Stay here," he ordered, his face so close to hers that he could feel the warmth of her skin and smell the lavender soap she used.

"Where are you going?"

"Cap'n Eilers might need some help."

"What can you do?" she asked, grasping his hand.

"Give it up!" Taggart said to the outlaws as he thumbed back the Colt's hammer. Instead, they reached for their weapons.

"Won't know till I get there." Slipping his fingers reluctantly from hers, he left the store. Hugging the wall, he sidestepped to the corner of the building and looked toward the bank.

Eilers had interrupted a holdup just as the culprits had tried to make their escape. One already lay sprawled in the street outside the bank. Another was riding hell-for-leather out of town. A third, also mounted, fought to control his horse and a bucking, riderless animal while a fourth man, laden with two canvas moneybags, rapidly emptied one of his two revolvers at Eilers.

The marshal, down on one knee, was reloading when a hurriedly aimed bullet found its mark. Its impact spun Eilers around, sending his revolver flying. Holstering his weapons, the outlaw ran to the spooked horse and grabbed for the saddle horn. His partner continued to haze the recalcitrant animal in a tight, counterclockwise circle while the man on the ground made several attempts to mount.

"Those idiots," Taggart whispered. It'd be easier, he thought, if they just stole another horse from several tied up along the street than try to handle that hammerhead.

Eilers, left arm numbed from the outlaw's slug, looked up to see Jimmy coming at a run. Thinking he was going to drag him out of harm's way, he lifted his right arm upward. But Jimmy ran past him and halted beside the marshal's new single-action Army Colt .44. He stooped to pick it up, then calmly inspected the barrel and open loading gate to make sure no dirt had gotten inside with the fresh cartridges. Jimmy snapped the gate closed with his thumb, brought the revolver up, and aimed it at the two outlaws as they and their horses made another circular pass toward him.

"Give it up!" came Taggart's stentorian command as he thumbed back the Colt's hammer.

Seeing the business end of a Peacemaker pointed in their direction, they abandoned the bucking horse and reached for their weapons.

Taggart did not hesitate. He squeezed the trigger and felt the familiar recoil against his palm. In measured succession he thumbed back the hammer and fired twice more as the outlaws' bullets whirred through the gunsmoke and past his head.

Both men were down, one curled up in pain as he clutched at his bloodied thigh. His partner, still holding the moneybags, lay motionless beside him. Heart racing as it had not done in years, Taggart covered the wounded man until one of the braver townsmen came out of hiding to retrieve the outlaw's revolver. Only then did he retreat to where Eilers now sat in the street.

After slipping the Colt into Eilers's holster, Jimmy gently pulled the marshal's shirt aside to look at his wounded arm.

"Bullet went right through and missed the bone, Cap'n. You'll have some rough days ahead, but Doc Wilson'll fix you up easy enough."

"I didn't know you could shoot that well with your left hand."

Taggart grinned. "Durin' the war, while you officers were learnin' what to do with finger bowls and silver salvers, us troopers were drillin' to use revolver and saber with either hand. Some things you just don't forget, Cap'n."

He looked back at the downed men. "Too bad for them that I didn't."

Eilers winced against the pain. "I guess my night deputy'll have to watch the town all by himself . . . unless you're willin' to be a special deputy till I get back on my feet. I know you can do the job, Sergeant."

"So do I, Cap'n."

"I'll ask Judge Harding to swear you in right away."

"Got some things to do, first, if you don't mind. I have to tell Miz Bass I'd be pleased to take Sunday supper with her." He plunged his fingers into his pocket and withdrew the coins there. "Then I got me enough money for a shave, haircut, and hot bath over at Vasquez's. Ten minutes ago, Cap'n, I wasn't nothin' but a damn drunk. No more, though." Taggart looked to the wooden walk where Theresa now stood, concern on her face melting into a smile. "No more." ⊞

how

Uncle Dan paid his Wild Bill

I was along with Pa when they went down to bail out Uncle Dan at LaSalle. It wasn't the first time, but it was going to be the last if Grandpa had anything to do with it. He went along, too. Pa was Gramps's reliable son, and Dan was the wild one.

Grandpa told Pa, "I ain't gonna let you get him out of this scrape scot-free, like you usually do."

Pa knew it wasn't any use to argue with Grandpa when he used that tone of voice. Uncle Dan was in for it—even I knew that, and I was only ten then.

Uncle Dan had been in a fight again. At Stopes's Billiard Parlor this time. Won it, too. But he had had some help.

by T. Jeff Carr

Uncle Dan didn't look as pretty as Wild Bill. It was plain he'd stepped in front of a couple of sets of hard knuckles.

I'll never forget seeing Uncle Dan's *help* standing up tall in court that morning, with his long hair curling down behind his ears. He didn't look seedy like he had a hangover, though he should have. Of course, I wasn't old enough to know that. I learned that because the family talked about the whole affair for years afterward. Uncle Dan and his *help* had been tying one on.

The judge was Tom Ogle (actually just a J.P.; Blunderbuss Ogle, they called him, because he used to take in a few hard ones himself with a scattergun). He gave the prisoner before the bar a severe look and said, "And what would your name be?"

"Jim Hickok."

"Your full name."

"James Butler Hickok."

"Ain't I heard of you somewhere?"

The prisoner shrugged.

"Where do you live?"

"Kansas, mostly."

"What're you doin' here, besides raising hell?"

The prisoner laughed at that. "Vistin' my folks up at Troy Grove."

That started old Blunderbuss thinking, I guess. A light seemed to go on somewhere and registered on his big broad face.

"You'd be Wild Bill Hickok, I guess."

The prisoner nodded. "They call me that sometimes."

Blunderbuss grinned. "It wouldn't be prying to ask why they call you Bill when your name's Jim, would it?"

"I reckon not. I always kinda wondered that myself. I guess when that damn fool down at Springfield, Missouri, made up those big windies for *Harper's* magazine and almost got me laughed out of town, he got it wrong. Most everyone's called me that ever since." He exploded into a little laugh that shook his long hair over his ears and he pushed it back.

That seemed to satisfy Blunderbuss. He looked over at the sheriff. "Bring in the next prisoner," he said.

Uncle Dan didn't look as pretty as Wild Bill. It was plain he'd stepped in front of a couple of sets of hard knuckles before Wild Bill, seeing they were badly outnumbered, had grabbed a pool cue and cleaned the place out.

After the hearing, I heard Blunderbuss say to Pa, "It must have been a helluva Donnybrook while it lasted. I'm sorry I missed seein' it. They say old Wild Bill moves like greased lightning when he gets riled. You wouldn't think it of a nice feller like him, would you?"

That was a fact. In all the time I spent around Wild Bill as a kid I never heard him raise his voice. And he laughed a lot.

That day old Blunderbuss eyed Uncle Dan like he'd never seen him before and said, "Give the court your name."

"Dan Eaton."

"How old're you, Dan?"

"Eighteen."

"How many times have I had you in here for fightin'?"

Uncle Dan looked pained. "Gosh, Blunderbuss, I don't know."

"That'll be an extra five dollars when we get around to it for not addressin' the court with due respect. You got anything to say for yourself?"

"They was from down at Beardstown. Real smart alecks. One bragged his pa was a copperhead during the war. Actually bragged about it, mind you. That's when I hit him in the mouth."

That got to Blunderbuss where he lived. He'd been a captain in the Second Illinois Volunteers. I can remember him sayin' many a time, "We'd a been the *First* Illinois if some other patriotic sons o' guns hadn't beat us to it by a day."

"You knock the bastard down?" Blunderbuss asked, forgetting his dignity for a minute.

"Damn well told. If he hadn't dropped I'd have gone around back to see what was holdin' him up."

Blunderbuss had to strangle a grin.

"That'll be the minimum the law allows fer about the twentieth offense," Blunderbuss said. "Twenty bucks and costs."

"Holy cow!" Uncle Dan exploded. "That's a month's pay. I'm broke." He looked over at Wild Bill. Bill grinned, pulled his pockets inside out, and shrugged.

"I'll teach you to play poker while we're sittin' it out," Bill said.

Grandpa cleared his throat. "I don't think that'll be necessary in this case," he said. "I'll pay their fines."

"For the record, state your name to the court."

Grandpa gave Blunderbuss a look that would have killed all the weeds along the road between LaSalle and home. Everyone knew who Isaac Eaton was. He was as famous as Peter Cartwright as a revivalist and big tent saver of souls from hellfire and damnation. Besides, he'd been the chap-

lain of Blunderbuss's regiment for four years during the war.

Blunderbuss didn't back down, though. He just looked at Grandpa, waiting.

Finally Gramps said, "Isaac Eaton's my name. You know that as well as I do, you gol-derned old fool." It was as close as he ever came to cussin'.

"That'll be five dollars for contempt, suspended subject to good deportment."

Gramps snorted. "Make it ten, ya gol-derned old fool!"

"Ten it is, and not suspended this time."

In all it cost Gramps that ten for himself, twenty-five including costs for Uncle Dan, and thirty for Wild Bill because Blunderbuss said he was a bad influence. I always thought he was a good influence and I got to know him pretty well that summer. The reason I got to know him was, as Gramps announced to Dan and Bill, "You boys're gonna work out that fine at hired hand's wages."

"I'm supposed to be out ridin' herd on Texas drovers tryin' to shoot up Kansas this summer," Wild Bill protested.

"Shoulda thought of that first. If you run off I'll come lookin' for you and it won't be with a six-shooter where you'd have the edge on me. I'll fetch you with a two-by-four when you ain't expectin' it."

Later Wild Bill confided to Uncle Dan when we was all down at the swimmin' hole. "Yer pa's a hard old boy. I'd really hate to have him lookin' for me. But his heart's in the right place. Besides, I needed some good hard work. I been lettin' myself get soft."

My sister Hallie turned eighteen that summer and was really an eyefull, even in the dresses they tried to hide gals in back then. She was a true blonde, like Ma, and tall as women went in those days; five nine, I reckon, and strong, but not so it showed. She didn't have any of those bulging muscles some farm gals get. Just stuck out right in all the places she should. Her eyes were as blue as blue gets, set just deep enough to be real striking to look at—even I used to find myself staring at them—and she had one of those cute noses that's just a little bit turned up on the end. Her face had high cheekbones and nice full lips. Pa used to give her a squeeze and say, "If you wa'n't so blonde, honey, I'd say you had some Injun blood." It always got a rise out of Ma, who'd say, "And what about me?" Because Hallie was a dead ringer for the way Ma looked in a daguerreotype she'd had made at Hallie's age. Pa'd just grin then and not say anything.

Dick Rule was sparkin' Hallie right smart by then, and there was a string of males from seventeen to seventy moonin' over her. I say seventy because even old Hiram Drum, rich as they come, was droppin' around pretty regular. His kind figured they could pretty much buy a wife, I suspect. And Dick Rule would be almost as rich someday when he inherited from his folks, which he surely would since he was an only child, a pretty unusual thing then.

I never liked Dick from the time I saw him kick my dog when he thought nobody was looking. Old Pal had jumped up on him real friendly, hoping for a pat and an ear scratching. Pal was a quick learner. He never came near Dick again. I wished my sis was as smart. But old Rule was sly enough to treat her like a queen. I figured the kicking would come after the ceremony. I may have been young but I was a long ways from dumb about people. I guess Pa had the same notion about Dick. He invited every young fellow who might shine with Hallie to come out to our place to dinner, or just to drop in and pass the time. He even invited some not so young. Ma never complained about the extra cookin', either. None of us liked Dick Rule except maybe Hallie. But she liked everybody unless they showed out poison mean or were skinflints and such.

Anyhow, it wasn't any surprise to me when Pa invited Wild Bill over for dinner the first Sunday after him and Dan went to work on Grandpa's farm. It was just down the road, so Bill and Dan walked over.

Pa hadn't told Hallie who was coming for dinner. In fact he hadn't told Ma, either. Didn't want to spoil the surprise. He knew I'd heard him doin' the inviting and told me to keep my trap shut. It really would be a big surprise, because everyone knew who Wild Bill was in those days after that braggin' magazine article that made him famous. That's another thing; everyone around there still called him Jim, and that's the way he wanted it. He always laughed over that Wild Bill handle.

I never liked Dick Rule from the time I saw him kick my dog when he thought nobody was looking. Old Pal never came near him again.

I was watching Hallie when Pa introduced Jim. He introduced

him as Wild Bill because he wanted to impress Ma and Hallie with the fact that they had a famous man on their hands. Jim never turned a hair. Just grinned. He knew what Pa was doing. But his eyes were all for Hallie. And the way she looked at him was something to see. Like a little girl with her first store-bought doll. She fell for Jim the first time she laid eyes on him, and to say "like a ton of bricks" is puttin' it mild. Pa was takin' it all in and smiling from ear to ear. And I felt real big, figuring I was in on his scheme. Old Dick Rule was going to have

Dick Rule started to run after the rig. Jim slapped the reins and the team leaped into a lope, clods flying.

to make some time to catch up and I was glad of it. I knew he'd be showin' up for dinner, too. He always did on Sunday. I could hardly wait to catch the look on his face when he found out who else was there.

I wasn't disappointed. Pa really did it up right. Dick came in his top buggy with a matched pair of bays that he didn't know how to drive. I always hoped they'd run away and dump him out and maybe break his neck, but they never did. Anyhow, Pa took the menfolks out to look over that team, braggin' them up and patting them. Dick really liked to have people make a fuss over that team, just like they were his, but they were really his pa's.

Those horses knew right off that Jim was a horse lover and a man that knew how to treat a horse right. He put his fingers up under their chins and scratched lightly, making them work their lips and ask for more. Not everyone can get away with that with a horse that's never seen them. All the while Jim was talking to them in a low voice. They pricked up their ears and looked all shiny-eyed like they were trying to understand what he was sayin', and maybe they did. I heard he had a horse out West that would do anything for him.

"Be careful with them," Dick said. "They're both apt to bite."

For all you could tell Jim didn't even hear him, just went on babying the horses. It got Dick's goat, because I knew for a fact both of those horses had bit him at least once. He was actually mortally afraid of them and had a hostler back at their stables that harnessed the team for him. He drove them like he was afraid they'd run away, too.

Pa could have horned in and saved Dick a lot of embarrassment, but he didn't. He knew Dick had a short fuse. I watched him gettin' red in the face. Finally he said, "Are you deef? I told you to get away from my team."

Jim gave him a mild look. "So you did," he said. "Sorry to get you riled. I just like horses, especially a pert set like yours."

Dick looked a little mollified. He nodded. "They're a handful. Won't let anyone but me drive 'em."

I knew that was a lie. Even his ma drove them, and his pa did for sure—both of 'em better than him, too, by a jugful.

"Do tell?" Jim said, grinning.

Dick probably took Jim for a farm yokel. He was dressed rough enough. None of us stayed dressed up after church except Gramps and he didn't care about puttin' on the dog. He was a strong believer that good works is what got a man into heaven. "Even Ayrabs," as he put it. He thought Dick Rule was a total loss.

"You maybe think you could handle them?" Dick suggested.

"I'm mostly a saddle man," Jim said. "Used to drive a team for pa on the farm." As a matter of fact he also drove a six-horse stage hitch and ten teams of oxen, which he neglected to mention.

By this time Ma and Hallie had come out to see what was taking us men so long to come up to the house. The rest of the kids were hanging over the picket fence around the yard.

"I don't mind if you want to try to drive my team," Dick said.

"If you think it's all right," Jim said.

"Sure. Go ahead. They like you." He sounded like he figured they'd run away, recognizing a greenhorn on the reins, and hoped they would.

Jim unsnapped the ground weight, got into the buggy, and quickly picked up the reins. "Hop up," he invited Hallie.

Before you could blink she was beside him and he had the team stepping out in a fast trot.

"Hey!" Dick yelled. "You'll get her killed." He started to run after the rig. Jim slapped the reins and the team leaped into a lope, clods flying. They looked like they'd waited all their lives to be cut loose to do their thing. Jim slowed them for the turn into the road, then stood up and whipped them so they fairly flew down the road, raising a huge cloud of dust and a thundering racket.

"The damn fool!" Dick yelled, shaking his fist after them. "He'll get her killed, maybe ruin the buggy." He sounded like he wasn't sure which would bother him most. He didn't mention banging up the horses because that never entered his head. "I'll wring his

neck when he gets back here—if he gets back here."

"You want I should saddle you up a horse to go after them?" Pa asked.

We all knew Dick drove the team because he must have been the world's worst rider. He gave Pa a dirty look.

"Just wait till he gets back here," he blustered. Dick was big and set himself up to be quite a scrapper. He was pretty careful who he picked on, though.

"I wouldn't go too hard on old Jim," Pa said. "He might kill you."

Dick looked at Pa as though he hadn't heard him right.

"What?" he asked.

"Kill you," Pa said. "That's Wild Bill Hickok. He was born just up the road a piece. His real name is Jim—James Butler Hickok, to be exact."

When Jim and Hallie got back, after about a fifteen-minute drive, he had those horses stepping high, heads up, necks arched like nobody's business, snorty and shiny-eyed. He pulled them in and they stood like statues for him while he jumped out and helped Hallie down. She fell against him as she got down and he held her a few seconds to steady her. The light in her eyes was a sight to see.

Dick didn't even give Jim a hard look when Pa introduced them. Just in case. He didn't stay for dinner, either. "I just dropped by to say hello," he said. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Hickok."

He drove off with the team, their heads drooping again like they belonged on one of those vegetable wagons that farmers bring to town. Horses know.

We was all hoping that Wild Bill might decide to stay around for a while. Maybe give up his wild ways and became Tame Jim. I know Ma and Pa had their fingers crossed. So did I. And my toes, too. It was plenty plain what Hallie thought. She showed it in her eyes and the soft look that came over her whole face every time she looked at Jim, which was most of the time.

It didn't take Gramps long to size up Jim. He put him to work breaking a new eighty with a young team he just bought. I heard Gramps tellin' Pa, "Jim Hickok gets more out of a team without tiring 'em out than any man I ever seen. And you should see him make 'em step. He talks to 'em all the time, like they was a pair of kids. And they listen. Maybe that's why he busts out more prairie in a day than anybody I ever saw."

I could see that set Pa to figuring, and I had a pretty good idea what he was figuring. He knew how Hallie felt.

Pa said to Gramps, "You wouldn't sell me that eighty Jim is workin' on, would you?"

Gramp guessed what he was thinking, I expect. "I *mought* do that. What'd you have in mind to do with it?"

Pa grinned. "Maybe get a hand to plant me a mess of grandkids."

I sure thought Jim would make a heck of a fine brother-in-law and I knew Dan loved him like a real brother. But I wasn't gettin' my hopes up. Young as I was I could feel the wild in Jim—the reason they called him Wild Bill. Maybe he wasn't the settling down kind. I expect that's what Gramps was thinking when he said, "I'll pray over that."

I was probably the first one who knew for sure that Jim and Hallie were seeing each other alone. Of course they took Sunday buggy rides and everybody knew that, but Jim was slippin' over at night and they'd meet in the orchard. If Ma and Pa suspected, they didn't let on. I used to Injun around in the dark. I heard 'em talking one night and slipped up as close as I could. They wasn't only talkin', either. It was pretty serious courting by the time I found out about it. They were huggin' each other and if I was any judge, doin' a lot of kissin', too.

"What if I can't settle down?" Jim said. "Bullets don't scare me anymore. But if I had to shoot and run it'd nigh kill a good woman."

Jim stayed around right into summer and I figured the chances looked pretty good to make him over into Tame Jim. But he wasn't too sure he could manage the change. We was all goin' down to the swimming hole regular after working in the fields and he opened up a couple of times to Dan, not caring if I heard.

"Your niece is a fine woman, Dan," was what he said the first time I recollect him bringing the subject up. It was always funny for me to remember that Dan was Sis's uncle, too, because he wasn't any older'n her.

"That's a fact, Jim," Dan said. And there was a tricky gleam in his eye when he asked Jim, "How come you should mention that?"

Dan was one fellow who could take liberties with the Wild Bill in Jim and not have to worry about maybe gettin' shot in the gizzard for mouthing off.

Jim laughed. "I reckon you

know." He punched me in the ribs and said, "Even the kid here knows." I wondered if he'd heard me stumbling around in the orchard snooping and spotted who it was. He had ears and eyes like an owl.

Dan said, "I reckon," but didn't push the subject. If Jim had something on his chest he'd mention it when he was ready.

The book was right. Jim was quick as greased lightning and it seemed to me he never missed. His pistols were beauties, too.

"Problem is," Jim said, "I don't know as I could settle down anymore. Don't know if people would let me."

"I don't see why not," Dan said.

"They might back here in Illinois," Jim allowed, "but even that feller Stopes down at the billiard place in LaSalle sets himself up to be a bad man. Used to gamble on the river. Sooner or later that kind has to try their luck."

"How?"

"Try to shoot me and get a big reputation. A lot of the crowd that comes up from Texas tries to nerve themselves up to get fellers like me whenever they come North. It's like an itch they've got to scratch."

Dan said, "If you and Hallie are figuring to get married I wouldn't let that worry you. You've taken bigger chances than that."

Jim nodded and was quiet thinking. "That's a fact," he finally said, "but none of those chances ever scared me more than this one. What if I can't settle down? Bullets don't scare me anymore. They haven't molded the one that'll get me. But if I had to shoot and run it'd nigh kill a good woman."

"Not Hallie. She'd go with you."

"And what kind of life would that be? She wants a home and kids. So do I, as far as that goes. But I just have a hunch that *they* won't let me anymore."

"They?"

"Yeah. There's one or two in every town. That dude in LaSalle. You go down to Beardstown and you'll find two more. There's probably a hundred in Chicago. I shoulda come home after the war. Now maybe I can't."

I think he'd have tried a respectable life even at that if luck hadn't gone against him. But he didn't and we all know how that worked out a few years later. Someone *had* molded the bullet that would get him. If things had worked out better he'd be buried over here on the hill instead of up there on the mountain in Deadwood.

I was along when the trouble broke that decided him to cut and run from respectability. Jim and Dan should have known better than to go back to Stopes's Billiard Parlor in LaSalle. In the first place there was a saloon attached and Dan wasn't noted for handling his liquor. I reckon I know why Jim went. If Stopes's kind, like those Texans, were looking for him, it was a two-way street. Once they published their intentions with even a look, the proud ones like Jim had to show up and let the challengers make their play.

Dave Tutt's case was a good example. One day while we were lying around the yard waiting for Ma to call us to Sunday dinner and looking up at the sky, Jim said, "There's a cloud up there with a face just like Dave Tutt."

"Who was Dave Tutt?" I asked.

"A feller I had to kill down in Springfield, Missouri."

He said it like it wasn't anything at all to kill someone. It was hard for me to look at Jim, the nice laughing fellow who swam and wrestled around with us, and let us josh him unmercifully without gettin' mad, and know that he had that other side. That other side was Wild Bill. He was a real deadly man. A killer.

The way he said it, so calm, I didn't think he'd care if I asked how come he killed Tutt, so I did.

Jim said, "He won all my money in a poker game, so I wagered my gold watch and he won that, too. It was one of those days I couldn't even draw a pair."

Dan said, "I reckon there was more to it than that."

Jim nodded. "Tutt was kind of a poor sport, even when he won. Besides, I stole his gal. He told it all over town he won that watch and bragged he was goin' to carry it across the square at high noon, just to get my goat. I didn't especially like his attitude, so I told him if he did I'd shoot a hole in it."

"Did you?"

Jim was quiet for a while, then laughed. "I sure did. It was his hard luck he had it in his vest pocket at the time. I wouldn't have done it, though, except he had his pistol out and aimed it at me."

"What happened then?" Dan asked.

"A jury turned me loose. Almost gave me a medal for gettin' rid of a derned fool. The judge was mad, though. He thought I should be hung, I guess."

That was feuding country, I knew. The old dueling code still went.

"I paid for his funeral," Jim said. "It's expected of a gent out there."

While Jim was around, the menfolks naturally had to get him out to shoot and show off. What he did then was why they call him the Prince of the Pistoleers in that book. The book was right. Jim was quick as greased lightning and it seemed to me he never missed. His pistols were beauties, too. Nickel-plated, engraved and inlaid with gold, with ivory handles. I wish I could say he let me shoot one, but he never did.

One day after Jim and Dan finished workin' out their fine with Gramps, they took me along over to LaSalle lookin' for a little relaxation. If Gramps had known where they were headed he wouldn't have given them the buggy, and it would have been just as well he didn't.

In those days a kid was allowed in a saloon as long as he was with grownups. They even let 'em drink if the grownups didn't care. I never did. Never wanted to. And I'm sure Dan and Jim wouldn't have let me. Dan was trying to teach me to play pool. It wasn't the first time I had a cue in my hand, but I was clumsy like all kids. Jim was a fine pool player. I suppose it was the same hand and eye coordination that made him an expert with guns.

When we went over to the pool table Jim said to Dan in a low voice, "Watch that dude, Stopes, whenever my back is toward him and give me the high sign if he makes any false moves."

We played one game and started another, and I felt myself gettin' tense as a fiddle string. Old Stopes was watchin' us and I knew he was pretending not to. He was a mean-looking man. He locked eyes with Jim but couldn't stare him down. Finally he grinned a sort of puny grin and went behind the bar. I wouldn't have paid attention if I hadn't heard what Jim had said to Dan about warning him—probably wouldn't have noticed a thing or been watching. As it was I could hardly hold my cue for wanting to see what Stopes was doing. For one thing he was drinking pretty heavy. Even I knew that some men did that to get up their nerve.

The serious trouble started when Jim was bent over the table to make a shot, with his back to Stopes. I saw Stopes swing the shotgun above the bar, but I was too scared to yell. Dan started to say, "Look out, Jim," but it was my look that tipped him off. It seemed to me that Jim jumped about six feet straight sideways. I heard the load of shot whistle by me and another shot even before the shotgun went off. I was seeing Wild Bill in good form. He spun and put a hole right in the middle of Stopes's vest. Before Stopes collapsed behind the bar the other barrel of his shotgun went off into the ceiling.

I couldn't believe that this man had been simply going to shoot Wild Bill down in cold blood for no reason, like Jack McCall did a few years later, just to get the reputation for doing it, and consequences be damned.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Jim said. "This fellow has a lot of friends down in this part of town."

He herded us out and up the street to the place where the buggy was hitched. "Get in," Jim said. He lashed the team into a broad circle in the street and headed out of town fast.

"We don't have to run," Dan said. "It was self-defense."

"We'll see," Jim said. "Meantime, let's put some space between us and LaSalle. I don't like the smell of the place. Stopes's kind has friends that'll try to get even. I'll come in and give myself up to the sheriff tomorrow, if he doesn't come out before then."

There were plenty of witnesses to what happened who were willing to tell the truth besides us. Stopes had a lot of friends, but he had a lot of enemies, too. Jim got off just like Dan said he would. A preliminary hearing in front of Blunderbuss was all that took place. The real trouble was what Blunderbuss had to say afterward, and the marshal and sheriff both backed him up. Court was over and they took Jim over for a friendly drink.

After awhile Blunderbuss got around to what was on their minds. He said, "Jim, you're as nice a fellow as anyone would ever want to meet and I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you probably noticed it's a strain on the community when you're around."

Jim could hardly deny that. He nodded and grinned. "You might say it ain't a case of what I've done, but what folks think I might do, I guess."

"You hit the nail on the head. You got to promise us you won't bring your guns with you when you come to town." The marshal and sheriff were nodding their heads and agreeing like a couple of chuckleheads.

I imagine Jim figured they

A terrible idea took hold of me, and it was that Jim was going to cut out, and I knew that'd break Hallie's heart.

must be a little tetched, since it was pretty obvious what would have happened this time if he hadn't been armed. He'd've been laid out by then in a box lined with satin. But he knew there wasn't any point in arguing. Folks in a settled place like ours just didn't understand. It wasn't as bad as it would have been back in Boston, but the same idea more or less applied.

Even at that, I always thought if Gramps had muzzled his religious mouth Jim might have married Hallie anyhow. He might have taken her West with him. But Gramps had to give Jim a talking to. "You should have had better sense than to go into that place again, especially takin' a young boy along," Gramps said. "Besides, a good shot like you could have just pinked Stopes. 'Thou shalt not kill,' it says in the Good Book. You know that. You've got to change your ways, my boy."

The whole family went over to break the news to Hallie that Wild Bill was dead, but we could tell she'd already heard.

Jim stood it all right. He must have thought Gramps was a great damn fool, though. But he knew it was all with good intent. Paving the road to hell always is.

We were down swimming again later when Jim mentioned that talking to almost word for word. "It's that 'changing my ways' business that got to me. I'm too damned old. Besides, if I'd just pinked that bastard he'd have had another try at me. Maybe brought along a few friends. I ain't cut out for this country and I ain't cut out to be married to a good woman and break her heart."

A terrible idea took hold of me, and it was that he was going to cut out, and I knew that'd break Hallie's heart. I popped off right then and said, "You ain't figurin' to leave, are you, Uncle Jim?" (He wasn't really my uncle, but it didn't seem right for a kid to call him just Jim, and I never did.)

He looked at me real serious and said, "I've got to think on it, kid."

I suspect even then he'd made up his mind, but didn't have the heart to tell me to my face.

I said, "Please don't leave, Uncle Jim. We all love you, especially Hallie."

He looked so sad when I said that I thought I was gonna cry from just lookin' at him. I guess he read my face. He reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "Don't look so glum," he said and laughed a little, then gave me a little punch. He looked me square in the eyes for a while. "And no matter what I have to do, you take care of your sister."

Dan put in, "I hope you'll think a long while on stickin' around, Jim. But no matter what you have to do, we'll both look out for Hallie *till you come back*. You can count on that."

I reckon Jim didn't have the heart to tell Hallie right out what he'd decided any more than he did me and Dan. She got the news in a note that Dan carried over. Of course he didn't know what was in it, or that Jim had cut out as soon as he left with the note.

We was all sittin' around after supper, except the young ones, who were outside running around. I heard Hallie give a little shriek and wondered what happened. The note fell out of her hands into her lap.

"He's gone!" she managed to say. We didn't need to ask who.

"He's never coming back." Her voice broke sayin' that much and she couldn't say any more. Her face was the saddest thing I ever looked at in my life.

Ma went over and took her in her arms. In a while they went back to Hallie's room and she didn't come out for two days, but I could hear her sobbing in there, or letting out a little howl sometimes.

Dan picked the note off the floor and read it, then tore it up. He never said what was in it, either, but he looked real sad. He said, "If I'd known what was in that note, I'd have burned it. She'd have been better off just wondering." Of course, none of us knew then that she was carrying Jim's baby—even she didn't, yet. If Dad had known he'd have cut out after Jim, and I'd bet my life he'd have come back, even if he got killed from putting up his guns in the bargain.

I went down to the swimming hole a couple of times with just my dog Pal along and felt a big lump in my throat, remembering Jim; how he laughed a lot and ran around with us just like a kid, ducking us and gettin' ducked himself, splashing water at each other. I said over and over, "Why did you have to go and do it, Jim?" I guess I knew, though. It was because deep down he was mortally afraid he could never get the wild out of him. Not even for the woman he loved.

I imagine Jim was somewhere on the way West by then, feelin' about as bad as she did, or worse. I wished I could kill Gramps and shut up his sanctimonious mouth. It wasn't the first time, and a long ways from the last. He was a good

man, but I never knew a Bible thumper who didn't have some damn fool in him somewhere. I always said Gramps killed Will Bill, not Jack McCall. Because I know Jim loved Hallie as much as she loved him. He'd have made a hell of a husband and father if he had had the chance. Maybe been able to change with a family to look after.

It wasn't two months or a little over that Hallie got out of her predicament by marrying that sorry excuse, Dick Rule. She wasn't the first, and I'm sure not the last that ever took that way out to get a name for her kid. I thought Pa was going to have apoplexy and Ma wasn't far behind.

Hallie and Dick knew how Pa and Ma felt, so they ran off to tie the knot. Eloped to Chicago and stayed a week, living high on Rule money. Then Hallie came back to that big farm. Looking back I think, young as I was, I knew why she was in such a hurry to get hitched. Any grownup would, even in those days. Pa and Ma must have, but I think they'd both rather have had her at home with no husband and the shame that came down on a pregnant woman with no husband in those days. I often wondered what kind of a fight it caused over there when Hallie named the boy James. If she'd have added Butler to it, they'd probably have thrown her out.

It wasn't long after the wedding that Dick's folks were took off a couple of hours apart from cholera. It left him a rich man. It also made him a sorrier excuse for a man than he'd been before then. I used to go over there sometimes and almost cried to see how sad Hallie always looked. She never smiled anymore and sure didn't laugh, her who'd always been so bright and happy. I didn't see any signs that he beat her, but the worst kind of beating is the one a woman takes inside from a sorry man. If he'd beat her, I knew Uncle Dan would have killed him. Dan would have figured he owed Jim that, especially.

I doubt that Dick Rule ever knew the truth about Hallie's boy for sure. Young Jim didn't start to look like his pa till he was maybe ten or so. By then Dick had been dead and under the loam a good many years. One of that fancy team of bays kicked him in the head when he walked into a stall one day without announcing himself.

I often wondered why someone as scared of those bays as Dick would have done a thing like that. We'll never know. At any rate it gave Hallie another chance at happiness, because Wild Bill was still making headlines when that happened.

She must have repented being too proud to write and tell Jim she was carrying his child as soon as she knew, because I got the letter right here she started to write to Jim right after Dick Rule went to his Maker. It starts out:

> Dearest Jim—
>
> I take my pen and seat myself to write what isn't going to be easy.
>
> I've thought of you every hour since you left. I guess you know why I got married. I'm widowed now. You may have heard. I'm not going to beat around the bush. Our son needs a father at home, and I have a big farm to run all by myself. . . ."

She never wrote any more on the letter and the clippings attached to it pretty much tell why.

One has a note written on the edge in Hallie's hand that says, "Jim sent this." It's the words to "Listen to the Mockingbird," that starts out: "I'm dreaming tonight of Hallie, sweet Hallie." There must have been a letter from Jim with it, but she probably threw

The winter after Jim pulled out of here he was hunting buffalo on the plains, drinkin' with the boys around a campfire.

that out for fear Dick might find it. It shows Jim was still thinking about her and maybe loving her yet as much as she did him. Another clipping from the Chicago paper says: "NUPTIALS. WILD BILL HICKOK AND FAMOUS PERFORMER AGNES LAKE MARRIED." That was the one that shut off her letter to Jim. It was dated right at that time.

A third clipping announced, "FAMOUS SCOUT AND LAWMAN KILLED IN DEADWOOD. SHOT IN THE BACK WHILE PLAYING POKER. WILD BILL HICKOK GONE TO GLORY."

The whole family went over to break the news to her, but we could tell she'd already heard. By then I guess she didn't have many tears left, but she wore widow's weeds again for Jim. Wore 'em the rest of her life. She got so she was almost her old self after the years passed, but she never so much as looked at another man. The picture over the mantel wasn't Dick Rule, either. It was Jim, taken the year he'd been home—the way she knew him and remembered him best.

She and Dan ran that farm all those years, raised young Jim and a bunch of orphans, to boot. I always suspected who it was that

sent donations where they were needed most around our neck of the woods, too. The sun will never shine on a finer woman than my sister Hallie.

The reason I'm going through Hallie's things is that she's laid out over here in the front room ready to be put in the ground tomorrow. She looks pretty as a picture. After old Rule died she looked ten years younger right off, and never did really look her age—hardly had any wrinkles when she died.

Like I said, Uncle Dan came over here to take care of her farm and raised young Jim like he was his own. Never got married. He told me why. "If it hadn't been for me, Jim would never have gone back to Stopes's place and everything would have turned out different." I admire the hell out of him for what he did.

And maybe, only maybe things would have been different. Maybe not. There was that wild streak a yard wide in Jim. Maybe he knew what he was doing. He might have been looking for an excuse to do it. He had wolf in his eye. The winter after he pulled out of here he was hunting buffalo on the plains, drinkin' with the boys around a campfire, playin' poker and tellin' stories with coyotes howlin' just over the hill. Maybe he lived the rest of his life and went out the way he wanted to, the only way he could, and knew it. Once the West gets in a man it changes him—I've seen it a good many times. They come back but they don't stay, mentally even if they do physically. They're always somewhere else—something in them watches and listens to what the rest of us who stayed home never see or hear.

Anyhow, if things had worked out different we'd most likely be layin' Hallie out over on the hill next to Wild Bill—or Tame Jim. As it is he's up there like I said, on Mount Moriah in Deadwood, with old Calamity Jane buried next to him. She was another one just like him, only a gal. She probably knew, too—knew the way she had to live and die with the wild in her.

I was with Hallie holding her hand when she went. She knew it was coming. She looked at me and said something just like her: "Be a good boy, Tommy," Think of that—I'll be eighty-one in June. Some *boy*.

Then she smiled, closed her eyes, and said, "I'm coming, Jim," and took her last breath—one big deep sigh.

I said a little prayer then, just a plain: "God take and keep her soul. And Jim's, too."

I reckon she'll get him past the Pearly Gates, killings and all.

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BY
Louis L'Amour

We Shaped the Land With Our Guns

We moved into the place on South Fork just before the snow went off. We had a hundred head of cattle gathered from the canyons along the Goodnight Trail, stray stuff from cattle outfits moving north. Most of these cattle had been back in the breaks for a couple of years and rounding them up was man-killing labor, but we slapped our iron on them and headed west.

Grass was showing green through the snow when we got there and the cattle made themselves right at home. Mountains to the east and north formed the base of a triangle of which the sides were shaped by creeks and the apex by the junction of those creeks. It was a good four miles from that apex to the spot we chose for our home place, so we had all natural boundaries with good grass and water. There were trees enough for fuel and shade.

The first two weeks we worked fourteen hours a day building a cabin, cleaning out springs, and throwing up a stable, pole corrals, and a smokehouse. We had brought supplies with us and we pieced

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them out with what game we could shoot. By the time we had our building done, our stock had decided they were home and were fattening up in fine shape.

We had been riding together for more than six months, which isn't long to know a man you go partners with. Tap Henry was a shade over thirty while I had just turned twenty-two when he hit the South Fork. We had met working for the Gadsen outfit, which took me on just west of Mobeetie, while Tap joined up a ways farther north. Both of us were a mite touchy but we hit it off right from the start.

Tap Henry showed me the kind of man he was before we had been together three days. Some no-account riders had braced us to cut the herd, and their papers didn't look good to me or to Tap. We were riding point when these fellers came up, and Tap didn't wait for the boss. He just told them it was tough, but they weren't cutting this herd. That led to words and one of these guys reached. Tap downed him and that was that.

He was a pusher, Tap was. When trouble showed up he didn't sidestep or wait for it. He walked right into the middle and kept crowding until the trouble either backed down or came through. Tall and straight standing, he was a fine, upright sort of man, except for maybe a mite of hardness around the eyes and mouth.

My home country was the Big Bend of Texas but most of my life had been lived south of the border. After I was sixteen the climate sort of agreed with me better. Tap drifted toward me one night when we were riding herd up in Wyoming.

"Rye," he said, that being a nickname for Ryan Tyler, "an hombre could go down in those breaks along the Goodnight Trail and sweep together a nice herd. Every outfit that ever come over this trail has lost stock, and lots of it is still back there."

"Uh-huh," I said, "and I know just the right spot for a ranch. Good grass, plenty of water and game." Then I told him about this place under the Pelado and he liked the sound of it. Whether he had any reason for liking an out-of-the-way place, I don't know. Me, I had plenty of reason, but I knew going back there might lead to trouble.

Two men can work together a long time without really knowing much about each other, and that was the way with me and Tap. We'd been in a couple of Comanche fights together and one with a Sioux war party. We worked together, both of us top hands and neither of us a shirker, and after a while we got a sort of mutual respect, although nobody could say we really liked each other.

Our first month was just ending when Jim Lucas showed up. We had been expecting him because we had seen a lot of Bar L cattle, and had run a couple of hundred head off our triangle of range when we first settled. He was not hunting us this day because his daughter was with him, and only one hand. Red, the puncher, had a lean face and a lantern jaw with cold gray eyes and two low, tied-down guns.

Lucas was a medium-built man who carried himself like he weighed a ton. He sat square and solid in the saddle, and you could see at a glance that he figured he was some shakes. Betty was eighteen that summer, slim but rounded, tan but lovely, with hair a golden web that tangled the sunlight. She had lips quick to laugh and the kind that looked easy to kiss. That morning she

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was wearing homespun jeans and a shirt like a boy, but no boy ever filled it out like she did.

Right off I spotted Red for a cold ticket to trouble. He stopped his horse off to one side, ready for disturbances.

"Howdy!" I straightened up from a dam I was building across a beginning wash. "Riding far?"

"That's my question." Lucas looked me over mighty cool. Maybe I looked like a sprout to him. While I'm nigh six feet tall I'm built slim and my curly hair makes me look younger than I am. "My outfit's the Bar L, and this is my graze."

Tap Henry had turned away from the corral and walked down toward us. His eyes went from Lucas to the redhead and back. Me, I was off to one side. Tap wore his gun tied down but I carried mine shoved into my waistband.

"We're not riding," Tap replied, "we're staying. We're claiming all the range from the creeks to the Pelado."

"Sorry, boys"—Lucas was still friendly, although his voice had taken on a chill, "that's all my range and I wasn't planning on giving any of it up. Besides"—he never took his eyes off Tap Henry—"I notice a lot of vented brands on your cattle. All I saw, in fact."

"See any of yours?" Tap was quiet. Knowing how touchy he could be, I was worried and surprised at the same time. This was one fight he wasn't pushing and I was sure glad of it.

"No, I didn't," Lucas admitted, "but that's neither here nor there. We don't like outfits that stock vented brands."

"Meaning anything in particular?" Tap asked.

Quiet as he was, there was a veiled threat in his tone now and Jim Lucas seemed suddenly to realize that his daughter sat beside him. Also, for the first time, he seemed to understand that he was dealing with a different kind of man than he had believed.

"We can be neighbors," Tap said. "We wanted our own outfit. Now we've got it and we intend to keep it."

"Meaning only," he said carefully, "that we don't like careless brands on this range or small outfits that start that way."

Tap was reasonable. More so than I had expected. "We rounded those cattle up," he explained, "from the canyons along the Goodnight. They are abandoned trail herd stock, and we got letters from three of the biggest outfits giving us title to all of their stuff we can find. Most of the other brands are closed out or in Montana. We aim to run this stock and its increase."

"Maybe. But run it somewheres else. This is my range. Get off it."

"Maybe you take in too much territory?" Tap suggested. "My partner and I aren't hunting trouble, but I don't reckon you hold any deed to this land from the government, the people, or God. You just laid claim to it. We figure you got your hands full, and we lay claim to the triangle of range described."

"Boss," Red interrupted. "I've seen this hombre somewhere before."

Tap did not change expression but it seemed to me that his face went a shade whiter under the tan. Betty was looking worried and several times she had started as if to interrupt.

"We can be neighbors," Tap persisted. "We wanted our own outfit. Now we've got it and we intend to keep it."

Lucas was about to make a hot reply when Betty interrupted. She had been looking at me. Everybody else seemed to have forgotten me and that pleased me just as well. My old gray hat was ragged on the crown and my hair hung down to my shirt collar. My buckskin pullover shirt was unlaced at the neck, my jeans were patched, and my boots were weather-worn and scarred by horns.

Betty said quietly, "Why don't you and your friend come to the dance at Ventana Saturday night? We would all enjoy having you."

Jim Lucas scowled and started impatiently as if to speak, but then he seemed to see me for the first time. His mouth opened, but he swallowed whatever it was he was going to say. What held him I do not know but he stared hard at me.

"Sure," I replied to Betty, "we would be glad to come. We want to be neighborly, like my partner said. You can expect us."

Lucas wheeled his horse. "We'll talk about this again. You've been warned."

He looked at Tap when he said it, and then started off with Betty beside him.

Red lingered, staring at Tap. "Where was it," he said, "that we met before?"

"We never met." Tap's voice was flat and hard. "And let's hope you don't remember."

That was more of a warning

than I ever heard Tap give anybody.

Usually, if you asked for it he just hauled iron and then planted you.

We started for the cabin together and Tap glanced around at me.

"Ever sling a six-gun, Rye? If war comes we'll have to scrap to hold our land."

"If it comes"—I pulled off my shirt to wash—"don't you worry. I'll hold up my end."

"That gal . . ." he commented suddenly, "really something, wasn't she?"

Now, why should that have made me sore?

Saturday morning we shaved early and dressed for the dance. It was a long ride ahead of us and we wanted to get started. When I got my stuff out of my warbag I looked down at those worn and scuffed gun belts and the two six-shooters.

Just for a minute there, I hesitated, then I stuffed a pair of old jeans in atop them.

Then I slicked up. My hair was long, all right, but my black broadcloth suit was almost new and tailored to fit. My clothes have to be tailored because my shoulders are so broad and my waist so slim I can never buy me a hand-me-down. With it I wore a gray wool shirt and a black neckerchief, and topped it off with my best hat, which was black and flat-crowned.

Tap was duded up some, too. When he looked at me I could see the surprise in his eyes, and he grinned.

"You're a handsome lad, Rye! A right handsome lad!" But when he'd said it his face chilled as if he had thought of something unpleasant. He added only one thing. "You wearing a gun? You better."

My hand slapped my waistband and flipped back my coat. The butt of my Russian .44 was there, ready to hand. That draw from the waistband is one of the fastest. There was no reason why I should tell him about the other gun in the shoulder holster. That was a newfangled outfit that some said had been designed by Ben Thompson, and if it was good enough for Ben, it was good enough for me.

It was a twenty-five-mile ride but we made good time. At the livery stable I ordered a bait of corn for the horses. Tap glanced at me.

"Costs money," he said tersely.

"Uh-huh, but a horse can run and stay with it on corn. We ain't in no position to ride slow horses."

Betty was wearing a blue gown the color of her eyes, and while there were a half dozen right pretty girls there, none of them could stand with her. The nearest was a dark-eyed señorita who was all flash and fire. She glanced at me once from those big dark eyes, then paused for another look.

Tap wasted no time. He had crossed the room to Betty and was talking to her. Her eyes met mine across the room, but Tap was there first and I wasn't going to crowd him. The Mex girl was lingering, so I asked for the dance and got it. Light as a feather she was, and slick and easy on her feet. We danced that one and another, and then an Irish girl with freckles on her nose showed up, and after her I danced again with Margita Lopez. Several times I brushed past Betty and we exchanged glances. Hers were very cool.

The evening was almost over when suddenly we found ourselves side by side. "Forgotten me?" There was a thin edge on her voice. "If you remember, I invited you."

"You also invited my partner, and you seemed mighty busy, so I—"

"I saw you," she retorted. "Dancing with Margita."

"She's a good dancer, and mighty pretty."

"Oh? You think so?" Her chin came up and battle flashed in her eyes. "Maybe you think—!" The music started right then so I grabbed her and moved into the dance and she had no chance to finish whatever she planned to say.

There are girls and girls. About Betty there was something that hit me hard. Somehow we wound up out on the porch of this old ranch house turned school, and we started looking for stars. Not that we needed any.

"I hope you stay," she said suddenly.

"Your father doesn't," I replied, "but we will."

She was worried. "Father's set in his ways, Rye, but it isn't only he. The one you may have trouble with is Chet Bayless. He and Jerito."

"Who?" Even as I asked the

Jerito Juarez was a name I was not likely to forget, and inside me something turned cold.

question the answer was in my mind.

"Jerito Juarez. He's a gunman who works for Bayless. A very fine vaquero, but he's utterly vicious and a killer. As far as that goes, Bayless is just as bad. Red Corram, who works for Dad, runs with them some."

Jerito Juarez was a name I was not likely to forget, and inside me something turned cold. Just then the door opened and Tap Henry came out. When he saw us standing close together on the dark porch his face, in the light of the door, was not pleasant to see.

"I was hunting you, Betty. Our dance is almost over."

"Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't realize . . .!"

Tap looked over her head at me. "We've trouble coming," he said, "watch your step."

Walking to the end of the porch, I stepped down and started toward the horses. Under the trees and in the deep shadows I heard voices.

"Right now," a man was saying, "ride over there and go through their gear. I want to know who they are. Be mighty careful, because if that Tap is who I think he is, he'll shoot mighty fast and straight."

Another voice muttered and then there was a chink of coins. In an open place under the trees I could vaguely distinguish three men.

The first voice added, "An' when you leave, set fire to the place."

That was the man I wanted, but they separated and I knew if I followed the two that went back toward the dance, then the man who was to burn us out would get away. Swiftly, I turned after the latter, and when he reached his horse he was in the lights from the dance. The man was a half-breed, a suspected rustler known as Kiowa Johnny.

Stepping into the open, I said to him, "You ain't going noplace to burn anybody out. If you want to live, unbuckle those gun belts and let 'em fall. And be mighty careful!"

Kiowa stood there, trying to make me out. The outline of me was plain to him, but my face must have been in shadow. He could see both hands at my sides and they held no gun, nor was there a gun in sight. Maybe he figured it was a good gamble that I was unarmed. He grabbed for his gun.

My .44 Russian spoke once, a sharp, emphatic remark, and then acrid powder smoke drifted and above the sound of the music within I heard excited voices. Kiowa Johnny lay sprawled on the hard-packed earth.

Wanting no gunfights or questions, I ducked around the corner of the dance hall and back to the porch where I had been standing with Betty. The door that opened to the porch was blocked by people, but all were looking toward the dance floor. One of them was Margita. Moving among them, I touched her arm and we moved out on the floor together.

Right away she knew something was wrong. She was quick, that girl. And then the music stopped and Jim Lucas was standing in the middle of the floor with Sheriff Fred Tetley.

"Kiowa Johnny's been killed," Tetley said. "Looks like he had a fair shake. Who done it?"

Tap was right in the middle of things with Betty and I saw Red frown as his eyes located him. Almost automatically, those eyes searched me out. He was puzzled when he looked away.

"Had it comin' for years!" A gray-haired man near me was speaking. "Maybe we won't lose so many cows now."

"Who killed him?" Tetley demanded irritably. "Speak up, whoever it was. It's just a formality."

My reasons for not speaking were the best ones, so I waited. Lucas put a hand on the sheriff's shoulder.

"Best forget it, Fred. His gun was half-drawn, so he made a try for it. Whoever shot him was fast and could really shoot. The bullet was dead center through the heart despite the bad light!"

His eyes went to Tap Henry, and then momentarily, they rested on me. Margita had me by the arm and I felt her fingers tighten. When she looked up at me she said quietly, "You saw it?"

"If you want to back down"—Tap's voice was irritable—"go ahead and go! I say show 'em they've got a fight on their hands!"

Somehow, something about her was warm, understanding. "I did it." My voice was low and we were a little apart from the others. "There are good reasons why nobody must know now. It was quite fair." Simply, then, but without mentioning Red, I told her what I had heard.

She accepted my story without question. All of them at the dance knew every effort would be made

to run us off South Fork, so my story was no surprise. Some women could keep a secret and I was sure she was one of them.

That we were on very shaky ground here both Tap and I knew. It was not only Lucas. As the biggest of the ranchers, and the one whose actual range had been usurped, he had the most right to complain, but Bayless of the Slash B was doing the most talking, and from what I had heard, he had a way of taking the law into his own hands.

Tap joined me. "You see that shooting?" he asked. Then, without awaiting a reply, he continued, "Guess he had it coming, but I wonder who did it? That's the kind of shooting Wes Hardin does or the Laredo Kid. Heard anything?"

"Only that Johnny had it coming. He was the kind who might be hired to dry-gulch a man or burn him out."

Tap glanced at me quickly, but before he could speak, Betty hurried up to us.

"You two had better go," she whispered. "There's some talk around and some of the men are hunting trouble."

She spoke to both of us, but she looked at me. Tap shifted his feet. "What do you expect us to do?" he demanded. "Run?"

"Of course not!" she protested. "But why not avoid trouble until I can talk some sense into Dad?"

"That's reasonable, Tap. Let's go."

"If you want to back down"—his voice was irritable and he spoke more sharply than he ever had to me—"go ahead and go! I say face 'em and show 'em they've got a fight on their hands!"

The contempt in his voice got to me but I took a couple of deep breaths before I answered him. "Don't talk like that, Tap. When a fight comes, I'll be ready for it, only why not give Betty a chance? Once the shooting starts there'll be no more chance."

Two men shoved through the door followed by a half dozen others. My pulse jumped and I grabbed Tap's arm. "Let's get out of here! There's Chet Bayless and Jerito Juarez!"

How could I miss that lithe, wiry figure? Betty Lucas gave me a swift, measuring look of surprise. Tap shook my hand from his arm and shot me a glance like he'd give to a yellow dog. "All right," he said, "let's go! I can't face them alone!"

What they must be thinking of me I could guess, but all I could think of was facing Bayless and Jerito in that crowded room. And I knew Jerito and what would happen when he saw me. The crowd would make no difference, nor the fact that innocent people might be killed.

"If it's killing you want," I said, "then you got a chance to start it. But for every one of us you bury, you'll bury three of you."

Betty avoided my eyes and moved away from my hand when I turned to say good-bye, so I merely followed Tap Henry out the door. All the way home he never said a word, nor the next morning until almost noon.

"You stay away from Betty," he said then, "she's my girl."

"Betty's wearing no brand that I can see," I told him quietly, "and until somebody slaps an iron on her, I'm declaring myself in the running."

"I don't," I continued, "want trouble between us. We've rode a lot of rivers together, and we've got trouble started here. We can hold this place and build a nice spread."

"What about last night?" His voice was cold. "You took water."

"Did you want to start throwing lead in a room full of kids and women? Besides, fightin' ain't enough. Anybody with guts and a gun can fight. It's winning that pays off."

His eyes were measuring me. "What does that mean?" That I'd fallen in his estimation, I knew. Maybe I'd never stood very high.

"That we choose the time to fight," I said. "Together we can whip them, but just showing how tough we are won't help. We've got to get the odds against us as low as we can."

"Maybe you're right." He was reluctant to agree. "I seen a man lynched once because he shot a kid accidental in a gunfight." He sized me up carefully. "You seemed scared of those three."

We looked at each other over the coffee cups and inside I felt a slow hot resentment rising, but I kept it down. "I'm not," I told him, "only Chet Bayless is known for eight square killings. Down Sonora way Jerito is figured to have killed twice that many. That Jerito is poison mean, and we can figure on getting hurt even if we win."

"Never figured them as tough

as all that," Tap muttered. Then he shot me a straight, hard glance. "How come you know so much about 'em?"

"Bayless," I said carefully, "is a Missourian. Used to run with the James boys, but settled in Eagle Pass. Jerito—everybody in Sonora knows about him."

The next few days followed pleasant and easy, and we worked hard without any words between us beyond those necessary to work and live. It irritated me that Tap doubted me.

On the fourth afternoon I was stripping the saddle off my steel-dust when I heard them coming. A man who lives like I do has good ears and eyes or he don't live at all. "Tap!" I called to him low but sharp. "Riders coming!"

He straightened up, then shot a look at me. "Sure?"

"Yeah." I threw my saddle over a log we used for that and slicked my rifle out of the scabbard and leaned it by the shed door. "Just let 'em come."

They rode into the yard in a compact bunch and Tap Henry walked out to meet them. Bayless was there, riding with Jim Lucas, but Jerito was not. The minute I saw that I felt better. When they first showed I had stepped back into the shed out of sight. There were a dozen of them in the bunch and they drew up. Bayless took the play before Lucas could get his mouth open.

"Henry!" He said it hard and short. "You been warned. Get your stuff. We're burning you out!"

Tap waited while you could count three before he spoke. "Like hell," he said.

"We want no nesters around here! Once one starts they all come! And we want nobody with your record!"

"My record?" Tap had guts, I'll give him that. He stepped once toward Bayless. "Who says I—!"

"I do!" It was Red Corram. "You rode with that Roost outfit in the Panhandle."

"Sure did." Tap smiled. "I reckon not a man here but ain't misbranded a few head. I ain't doing it now."

"That's no matter!" Bayless was hard. "Get out or be buried here!"

Lucas cleared his throat and started to speak. Tap looked at him. "You feel that way, Lucas?"

"I'm not for killing," he said, "but—!"

"I am!" Bayless was tough about it. "I say they get out or shoot it out!"

Tap Henry had taken one quick glance toward the shed when they rode up, and when he saw me gone he never looked again. I knew he figured he was all alone. Well, he wasn't. Not by a long shot. Now it was my turn.

Stepping out into the open, I said, "That go for me, too, Chet?"

He turned sharp around at the voice and stared at me. My hat was pulled low and the only gun I wore was that .44 Russian in my waistband. I took another step out and a little bit toward the trail, which put Bayless in a bad spot. If he turned to face me his side was to Tap. "Who are you?" he demanded. He was a big blue-jowled man, but right now the face under those whiskers looked pale.

"The name is Tyler, Chet. Ryan Tyler. Don't reckon you ever heard *that* name before, did you now?" Without turning my head, I said to Tap, but loud enough so they could all hear me, "Tap, if they want to open this ball, I want Bayless."

They were flabbergasted, you could see it. Here I was, an unknown kid, stepping out to call a rancher known as a gunman. It had them stopped, and nobody quite knew what to say.

"Lucas," I said, "you ain't a fool. You got a daughter and a nice ranch. You got some good boys. If this shooting starts we can't miss Bayless or you."

It was hot that afternoon, with the clouds fixing up to rain. Most of the snow was gone now, and there was the smell of spring in the air.

"Me, I ain't riding nowhere until I've a mind to. I'm fixing to stay right here, and if it's killing you want, then you got a chance to start it. But for every one of us you bury, you'll bury three of you."

Tap Henry was as surprised as they were, I could see that, and it was surprise that had them stopped, not anything else. That surprise wasn't going to last, I knew. Walking right up to them, I stopped again, letting my eyes sweep over them, then returning to Bayless.

"Why don't you get down, Chet? If you go for that gun you better have solid footing. You don't want to miss that first shot, Chet. If you miss it you'll never get another.

"You aimed to do some burning, Chet. Why don't you get down and

Chet Bayless and Jerito were going to come for me. Jerito had good reason to hate me, and he would know me for the Laredo Kid.

start your fire? Start it with a gun like your coyote friend did?" Without shifting his eyes, Bayless stared, and then slowly he kicked one foot out of a stirrup. "That's right, Chet. Get down. I want you on the ground, where you don't have so far to fall. This hombre"—I said it slow—"paid Kiowa Johnny to burn us out. I heard 'em. I gave Johnny a chance to drop his guns and would have made him talk, but he wanted to take a chance. He took it."

"You killed Johnny?" Lucas demanded, staring at me. "He was supposed to be a fast man with a gun."

"Him?" The contempt was thick in my voice. "Not even middling fast." My eyes had never left Bayless. "You want to start burning, Chet, you better get down."

Chet Bayless was bothered. It had been nigh two years since he had seen me and I'd grown over an inch in height and some in breadth of shoulder since then. My face was part shaded by that hat and he could just see my mouth and chin. But he didn't like it. There was enough of me there to jar his memory and Chet Bayless, while fast with a gun, was no gambler. With Jerito or Red there, he would have gambled, but he knew Red was out of it because of Tap.

"Lucas," I said, "you could be riding in better company. Bayless ain't getting off that horse. He's got no mind to. He figures to live awhile longer. You fellers better figure it this way. Tap and me, we like this place. We aim to keep it. We also figure to run our own cows, but to be fair about it, anytime you want to come over here and cut a herd of ours, come ahead. That goes for you—not for Bayless or any of his gun-handy outfit."

Chet Bayless was sweating. Very careful, he had put his toe back in the stirrup. Jim Lucas shot one glance at him, and then his old jaw set.

"Let's go!" He wheeled his horse and without another word they rode away.

Only Red looked back. He looked at Tap, not me. "See you in town!" he said.

Henry called after him. "Anytime, Red! Just anytime at all!"

When the last of them had gone he turned and looked at me. "That was a tough play, kid. S'pose Bayless had drawed on you?"

"Reckon he'd of died," I said simply enough, "but I didn't figure he would. Chet's a cinch player. Not that he ain't good with that Colt. He is—plenty!"

Walking back, I got my rifle. "Gosh amighty, I'm sure hungry!" I said, and that was all. What Tap thought of it, I had no idea. Only a couple of times I caught him sizing me up. And then the following night he rode off and I knew where he was riding. He was gone a-courting of Betty Lucas.

That made me sore but there was nothing I could do about it. He sort of hinted that Margita was my dish, but that wasn't so. She was all wrapped up in some vaquero who worked for her old man, although not backward about a little flirtation.

One thing I knew. Chet Bayless was going to talk to Jerito and then they were going to come for me. Jerito Juarez had good reason to hate me, and he would know me for the Laredo Kid.

Me, I'd never figured nor wanted the name of a gunfighter, but it was sort of natural-like for me to use a gun easy and fast. At sixteen a kid can be mighty touchy about not being growed up. I was doing a man's job on the NOB outfit when Ed Keener rawhided me into swinging on him. He went down, and when he came up he hauled iron. Next thing I knew Keener was on the ground drilled dead center and I had a smoking gun in my hand with all the hands staring at me like a calf had suddenly growed into a mountain lion right before them.

"I ain't missed a shot since I was eleven years old," I said, "so anybody fixin' to die sure don't need to go to no trouble tonight!"

Keener had three brothers, so I took out and two of them cornered me in Laredo. One of them never got away from that corner, and the other lived after three months in bed. Meanwhile, I drifted into Mexico and worked cows down there. In El Paso I shot it out with Jerito's brother and downed him, and by that time they were talking me up as another Billy the Kid. They called me Laredo for the town I hailed from, but when I went back thataway I went into the Nueces country, where the third Keener braced me and fitted himself into the slot of Boot Hill alongside his brothers.

After that I'd gone kind of hogwild, only not killing anybody but some ornery Comanches. Howso-

ever, I did back down a sheriff at Fort Griffin, shot a gun out of another's hand in Mobeetie, and backed down three tough hands at Doan's Crossing. By that time everybody was talking about me, so I drifted where folks didn't know Ryan Tyler was the Laredo gunfighter.

Only Chet Bayless knew because Chet had been around when I downed the Keeners. And Jerito knew.

After that I quit wearing guns in sight and avoided trouble all I could. That was one reason this out-of-the-way ranch under the Pelado appealed to me, and why I avoided trouble all I could.

It must have been midnight and I'd been asleep a couple of hours when a horse came hell a-whoppin' down the trail and I heard a voice holler the house. Unloading from my bunk, I grabbed my rifle and gave a call from the door. Then I got a shock, for it was Betty Lucas.

"Rye! Come quick! Tap killed Lon Beatty and a mob's got him! They'll hang him!"

No man ever got inside of his clothes faster than me, but this time I dumped my warbag and grabbed those belted guns. Swinging the belts around me, I stuck my .44 Russian into my waistband for good measure and ran for my horse. Betty had him caught and a saddle on him, so all I had to do was cinch up and climb aboard.

"They are at Cebolla!" she called to me. "Hurry!"

Believe me, I lit a shuck. That steeldust I was on was a runner and chock-full of corn. He stretched his legs and ran like a singed cat, so it wasn't long until the lights of Cebolla showed. Then I was slowing down with a dark blob in the road ahead of me with some torches around it. They had Tap, all right, had him backward on his horse with a rope around his neck. He looked mighty gray around the gills but was cussing

I never moved so fast in my life! As Betty sprawled in the dust my right-hand gun began to make war talk across her body.

them up one side and down the other. Then I came up, walking my horse.

"All right, boys!" I let it out loud. "Fun's over! No hanging tonight!"

"Who says so?" They were all peering my way, so I gave it to them.

"Why, this here's Rye Tyler," I said, "but down Sonora way they call me Laredo, or the Laredo Kid. I've got a Winchester here and three loaded pistols, and I ain't the kind to die quick, so if some of you hombres figure you'd like to make widows and orphans of your wives and kids, just start reaching.

"I ain't," I said, "a mite particular about who I shoot. I ain't honing to kill anybody, but knowing Tap, I figure if he shot anybody it was a fair shooting. Now back off, and back off easylike. My hands both work fast, so I can use both guns at once. That figures twelve shots if you stop me then, but I got a Winchester and another gun. Me, I ain't missed a shot since I was eleven years old, so anybody fixin' to die sure don't need to go to no trouble tonight!"

Nobody moved, but out of the tail of my eye I could see some change of expression on Tap's face.

"He reached first," Tap said.

"But he was just a kid!" Who that was, I don't know. It sounded like Gravel Brown, who bummed drinks around Ventana.

"His gun was as big as a man's," Tap said, "and he's seventeen, which makes him old as I was when I was segundo for a fighting outfit driving to Ogallala."

Brown was no fighter. "Gravel," I said, "you move up easylike and take that noose off Tap's neck, and if you so much as nudge him or that horse they'll be pattin' over your face with a spade come daybreak."

Gravel Brown took that noose off mighty gentle. I'd walked my horse up a few steps while Gravel untied Tap's hands, and then restored his guns.

"You may get away with this now, Tyler," somebody said, "but you and Tap better take your luck and make tracks. You're through here. We want no gunslingers in this country."

"No?" That made me chuckle. "All right, amigo, you tell that to Chet Bayless, Red Corram, and most of all, Jerito Juarez. If they go, we will. Until then, our address is the Pelado, and if you come a-visiting, the coffee's always on. If you come hunting trouble, why I reckon we can stir you up a mess of that." I backed my horse a couple of feet. "Come on, Tap. These boys need their sleep. Let 'em go home."

We sat there side by side and watched them go. They didn't like

it, but none of them wanted to be a dead hero. When they had gone, Tap turned to me.

"Saved my bacon, kid." He started riding, and after a ways he turned to me. "That straight about you being the Laredo gunfighter?"

"Uh-huh. No reason to broadcast it."

"And I was wondering if you'd fight! How foolish can a man be?"

It set like that for a week, and nobody showed up around South Fork and nobody bothered us. Tap, he went away at night occasional, but he never said anything and I didn't ask any questions. Me, I stayed away. This was Tap's play, and I figured if she wanted Tap she did not want me. Her riding all that way sure looked like she did want him, though. Then came Saturday and I saddled up and took a packhorse. Tap studied me, and said finally, "I reckon I better side you."

"Don't reckon you better, Tap," I said. "Things been too quiet. I figure they think we'll do just that, come to town together and leave this place empty. When we got back we'd either be burned out or find them sitting in the cabin with Winchesters. You hold it down here."

Tap got up. His face was sharp and hard as ever, but he looked worried. "But they might gang you, kid. No man can buck a stacked deck."

"Leave it to me," I said, "and we've got no choice anyway. We need grub."

Ventana was dozing in the sun when I walked the steeldust down the main alley of the town. A couple of sleepy old codgers dozed against the sun-backed front of a building, a few horses stood three-legged at the tie rail. Down the street a girl sat in a buckboard, all stiff and starched in a gingham gown, seeing city life and getting broken into it.

> **"You and me, kid," Tap said, "we can whip the world! Or we can make it plumb peaceful! I reckon our troubles are over."**

Nobody was in the store but the owner himself and he was right pert getting my stuff ready. As before, I was wearing three guns in sight and a fourth in that shoulder holster under my jacket. If they wanted war they could have it.

When my stuff was ready I stashed it near the back door and started out the front. The storekeeper looked at me, then said, "You want to live you better hightail it. They been waiting for you."

I shoved my hat back on my head and grinned at him. "Thanks, mister, but that sure wouldn't be neighborly of me, would it? Folks wait for me shouldn't miss their appointment. I reckon I'll go see what they have to say."

"They'll say it with lead." He glowered at me, but I could see he was friendly.

"Then I guess I can speak their language," I said. "Was a time I was a pretty fluent conversationalist in that language. Maybe I still am."

"They'll be in the Ventana Saloon," he said, "and a couple across the street. There'll be at least four."

When I stepped out on the boardwalk about twenty hombres stepped off it. I mean that street got as empty as a panhandler's pocket, so I started for the Ventana, watching mighty careful and keeping close to the buildings along the right-hand side of the street. That store across the street where two of them might be was easy to watch.

An hombre showed in the window of the store and I waited. Then Chet Bayless stepped out of the saloon. Red Corram came from the store. And Jerito Juarez suddenly walked into the center of the street. Another hombre stood in an alleyway and they had me fairly boxed. "Come in at last, huh?" Bayless chuckled. "Now we see who's nestin' on this range!"

"Hello, Jerito," I called, "nobody hung you yet? I been expecting it."

"Not unteel I keel you!" Jerito stopped and spread his slim legs wide.

Mister, I never seen anything look as mean and ornery as that hombre did then! He had a thin face with long narrow black eyes and high cheekbones. It wasn't the rest of that outfit I was watching, it was him. That boy was double-eyed dynamite, all charged with hate for me and my kind.

"You never seen the day," I said, "when you could tear down my meathouse, Jerito." Right then I felt cocky. There was a devil in me, all right, a devil I was plumb scared of. That was why I ducked and kept out of sight, because when trouble came to me I could feel that old lust to kill getting up in my throat and no smart man wants to give rein to that sort of

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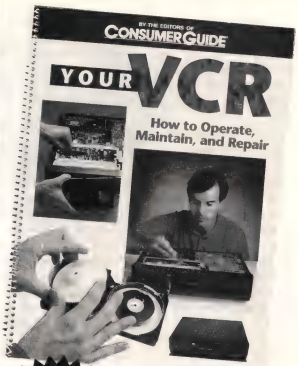

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thing. Me, I rode herd on it, mostly, but right now it was in me and it was surging high. Right then if somebody had told me for certain sure that I was due to die in that street, I couldn't have left it.

My pulse was pounding and my breath coming short and I stood there shaking and all filled with wicked eagerness, just longing for them to open the ball.

And then Betty Lucas stepped into the street.

She must have timed it. She must have figured she could stop that killing right there. She didn't know Chet Bayless, Corram, and those others. They would fire on a woman. And most Mexicans wouldn't but she didn't know Jerito Juarez. He would have shot through his mother to kill me, I do believe.

Easylike, and gay, she walked out there in that dusty street, swinging a sunbonnet on her arm, just as easy as you'd ever see. Somebody yelled at her and somebody swore, but she kept coming, right up to me.

"Let's go, Rye," she said gently. "You'll be killed. Come with me."

Lord knows, I wanted to look at her, but my eyes never wavered. "Get out of the street, Betty. I made my play. I got to back it up. You go along now."

"They won't shoot if you're with me," she said, "and you must come, *now!*" There was awful anxiety in her eyes, and I knew what it must have taken for her to come out into that street after me. And my eyes must have flickered because I saw Jerito's hand flash.

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Me? I never moved so fast in my life! I tripped up Betty and sprawled her in the dust at my feet and almost as she hit dust my right-hand gun was making war talk across her body, lying there so slim and lovely, angry and scared.

Jerito's gun and mine blasted fire at the same second, me losing time with getting Betty down. Something ripped at my sleeve and then I stepped over her and had both guns going, and from somewhere another gun started and Jerito was standing there with blood running down his face and it all twisted with a kind of wild horror above the flame-stabbing .44 that pounded death at me.

Bayless I took out with my left-hand gun, turning him with a bullet through his right elbow, a bullet that was making a different man of him, although I didn't know it then.

He never again was able to flash a fast gun!

Jerito suddenly broke and lunged toward me. He had blood all over the side of his head and face and shoulder, but he was still alive and in a killing mood. He came closer and we both let go at point-blank range, but I was maybe a split second faster and that bullet hit bone.

When a bullet hits bone a man goes down, and he went down and hard. He rolled over and stared up at me.

"You *fast!* You . . . *diablo!*" His face twisted and he died right there, and when I looked up, Tap Henry was standing alongside the Ventana Saloon with a smoking gun in his hand, and that was a Christian town.

That's what I mean. We made believers out of them that day in the dusty street on a warm, still afternoon. Tap and me, we made them see what it meant to tackle us and the town followed the ranchers and they followed Jim Lucas when he came down to shake hands and call it a truce.

Betty was alongside me, her face dusty but not so pale anymore, and Tap walked over, holstering his gun. He held out his hand, and I shook it. We'd been riding partners for months, but from that day on we were *friends*.

"You and me, kid," he said, "we can whip the world! Or we can make it plumb peaceful! I reckon our troubles are over."

"No hard feelings?" One of my arms was around Betty.

"Not one!" He grinned at me. "You was always head man with her. And us? Well, I never knowed a man I'd rather ride the river with!"

There's more cattle on the Pelado now, and the great bald dome of the mountain stands above the long, green fields where the cattle graze, and where the horses' coats grow shining and beautiful, and there are two houses there now, and Tap has one of them with a girl from El Paso, and I have the other with Betty.

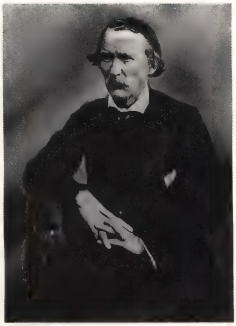
We came when the country was young and wild, and it took men to curry the roughness out of it, and we knew the smell of gunsmoke, the buffalo-chip fires, and the long swell of the prairie out there where the cattle rolled north to feed a nation on short-grass beef.

We helped to shape that land, hard and beautiful as it was, and the sons we reared, Tap and me, they ride where we rode, and when the day comes, they can carry their guns, too, to fight for what we fought for, the long, beautiful smell of the wind with the grass under it, and the purple skies with the slow smoke of home fires burning.

All that took a lot of building, took blood, lead, death, and cattle, but we built it, and there she stands, boys. How does she look now? ⊠

LITTLE CHIEF

THE STORY OF KIT CARSON



THE MAN WHO CAME TO stand as the exemplar of the western frontier and whose name would be linked to Odysseus, Ulysses, Jason, Hector, Nimrod, Norse heroes, and the knights of the Round Table, was born on Christmas Eve, 1809, near Richmond, Kentucky, a short distance from the birthplace of the man who represented the old eastern frontier–Daniel Boone. Named Christopher Houston Carson and called "Kit" from an early age, he was the sixth of the ten children of Lindsey Carson, an Irish emigrant farmer who had seen service in the Revolutionary War and Rebecca Robinson of Virginia.

In about 1812, the family moved to Howard County, Missouri (passing through Hardin County, Kentucky, where Nancy Hanks Lincoln was nursing her baby, Abraham–Kit's senior by less than eleven months), where Lindsey established a farm on the outskirts of the town of Franklin. In 1818, the elder Carson died from injuries he sustained when a tree fell on him and Rebecca

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

BY GRIFFIN OLIVER

struggled to maintain the farm and her family. Kit, who had no formal education, at least learned about horses from his farm work, and when he reached fourteen his mother found him a job in Franklin as apprentice to a saddle maker named David Workman.

For young Kit, Workman's saddle shop served as a tantalizing window on a world he desperately wanted to see close up. Franklin, port of embarkation for the trails up the Missouri River to Oregon and southwest to fabled Santa Fe, swarmed with sun-baked men in buckskins bringing beaver hides and buffalo robes from the Rocky Mountains, with immigrant journeyers and their great ox-drawn Conestoga wagons laboring along the muddy, rutted main street and mule trains laden with trade goods—heady stuff for a runty lad drudging at a workbench.

Kit watched the scene from his shop window for as long as he could, then, in August 1826, at age sixteen, he ran away from home and work to join the excitement. His employer dutifully if, judging from the reward, half-heartedly, ran an ad in the *Missouri Intelligencer* on October 6, which read:

> To whom it may concern: That Christopher Carson, a boy about sixteen years old, small of his age, but thick-set, light hair, ran away from the subscriber, living in Franklin, Howard County, Mo., to whom he had been bound to learn the saddler's trade, on or about the first day of September last. He is supposed to have made his way toward the upper part of the state. All persons are notified not to harbor, support, or subsist said boy under penalty of law. One cent reward will be given to any person who will bring back the said boy.

KIT CARSON BECAME IN RECORD TIME AND AT A RECORD YOUNG AGE A FRIEND AND EQUAL TO SOME OF THE GREATEST FRONTIER FIGURES OF HIS ERA.

By the time the ad ran, the runaway had made his way to Independence and found employment as a "cavvy" (wrangler for a remuda of horses) with trader Charles Bent, en route to Santa Fe.

That first eight-hundred-mile journey to Santa Fe would forever remain as fresh as yesterday to Kit. His introduction to the free, rough life of the plains and deserts of the Southwest included one event that seared his memory. On the trail, one of Bent's traders, Andrew Broadus, had his arm maimed in an accidental rifle discharge. The wound developed gangrene and Kit witnessed the crude camp amputation: a skinning knife and toolbox saw took the arm off, a kingbolt from a wagon, heated white, cauterized the blood vessels, and axle grease was smeared over the raw stump. Broadus survived and Kit learned a valuable lesson: that life on the trail was no lark nor any place for the weak in body or spirit.

Over the next decade, he accomplished something quite remarkable: He became in record time and at a record young age a friend and equal to some of the greatest frontier figures of the era.

With the town of Taos, the fur trade center eighty miles northeast of Santa Fe, as his pied-à-terre, Kit found work as a teamster on a wagon train to El Paso and into Chihuahua, Mexico, where his quick grasp of Spanish helped his employer.

In 1828, working with the veteran mountain man Ewing Young and his party of forty seasoned trappers, Carson made his first expedition to California. En route, in Arizona, Young's party had to fight Apaches (Kit is said to have killed and scalped at least one), and in California, Klamath Indians, as they made their way north to the Sacramento River.

In September 1830, not yet twenty-one years old and just returned to Taos from California, he joined forces with mountain man legend Tom "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick, beginning this venture 104 "plews" (prime beaver hide: coin of the mountain man realm) in the hole: he had to pay Fitzpatrick for a saddle mule, Spanish saddle, Hudson's Bay capote (blanket coat), a three-foot strip of chewing tobacco, six traps, and several galena "pigs" (bars of lead from which to make rifle balls). Fitzpatrick led his party of trappers, which later included such renowned mountain men as Jim Bridger and Joe Meek, to the Arkansas River into Colorado, to the Platte, Sweetwater, Green, and Bear rivers, and to winter quarters on the Salmon. By the spring of 1831, Kit had paid his 104-plew debt to Fitzgerald and had 160 other plews of his own (worth six dollars each) plus a number of otter, fox, and muskrat skins, and one huge bear hide he used as a blanket. He was now also a veteran of fights with Crow and Blackfeet war parties.

In 1833, he trapped the Arkan-

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sas River with Joe Meek and others and made one almost-fatal excursion south into Comanche country. Meek, Carson, and their trapper partners were attacked by a Comanche war party, ended up forted behind the bodies of their mules, held off a dozen attacks, and killed forty-two Indians before the Comanches abandoned the fight.

A year later, following the Green River "rendezvous" (the annual fur trader's fair), Carson joined a party of fifty trappers, led by Jim Bridger. In camp on the Snake River in February 1835, thirty Blackfeet ran off eighteen of the trappers' horses and Kit rode with eleven others to rescue their animals. In the ensuing fight, Kit saved the life of a man named Mark Head and took a painful gunshot wound in his shoulder in the process. He recovered in time to continue tending his traps through the rest of the season.

One of the most celebrated episodes in Carson's career, a favorite of dime novel writers ever after, occurred at the Green River rendezvous in the summer of 1835. The traders set up their camp adjacent to an Arapaho village and as the days passed, Kit's eye fell on an Arapaho girl named Waa-nibe. He went so far as to make a preliminary courtship present to her father of powder and ball. Accounts vary widely on precisely what happened after this, but it appears that in the camp of Captain Andrew Drips of the American Fur Company was a French trapper named Shunar (or Chouinard or Shunan), a huge, bullying drunk, much disposed to ragging and threatening the Americans. At least one of Carson's biographers claims Shunar insulted or tried to rape the Arapaho girl Waa-nibe, and that Kit walked over to Drips's camp and confronted the Frenchman, a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, in his lair.

"You cain't scare me," Carson said to the Frenchman, Shunar. "Keep your trap shut. If ye don't, I'll rip your guts out!"

Carson biographer Stanley Vestal, who claimed to have had the story from Arapaho eyewitnesses, gave this account of the confrontation. Kit, referring only to the insults to the American trappers, said, "Hyar's an American, Shunar, and the meanest kind at that. Thar's plenty of men in camp can lick the hindsights offen you, only some of 'em are scairt of your brag. Wal, you cain't scare me. Keep your trap shut. I won't take such talk from no man. If ye don't, I'll rip your guts out!"

John S. C. Abbott, an early (1873) biographer of Carson, gives a version of the showdown that made Kit sound like an Oxford don: "Captain Shunan, I am an American and one of the smallest and weakest of them all. We have no disposition to quarrel with anyone. But this conduct can no longer be endured. If it is continued, I shall be under the necessity of shooting you."

Most sources agree on the result of the challenge. The men fetched their sidearms and horses and rode up to each other. Both guns were fired simultaneously; Shunar's wrist was shattered by Kit's bullet, Kit's hair "parted" by Shunar's shot and his face burned by the powder.

Vestal claims that Shunar begged for mercy but that Carson found another pistol and killed the Frenchman. "The trappers on the sidelines were happy at the outcome of the fight. That night Kit hammered another brass tack into the stock of his rifle," Vestal says.

Most other sources say Shunar was spared and stayed quiet, nursing his wound.

Kit himself, in his ghost-written memoir, described the duel laconically and did not admit to either killing or sparing Shunar: "I told him I was the worst American in the camp. Many could thrash him, only they did not on account of being afraid, and that if he made use of any more such expressions, I would rip his guts . . . We both fired at the same time; all present said but one report was heard. I shot him through the arm and his ball passed my head, cutting my hair and the powder burning my eye . . . During our stay in camp we had no more bother with this bully Frenchman."

Before the rendezvous ended, Kit married Waa-nibe—whom he called Alice—and the next year she bore him a daughter. He named her Adeline.

Before his fateful first meeting with Frémont in 1842, Kit trapped for the Hudson's Bay Company on the Humboldt (called Mary's River then) in northeastern Nevada and on the Madison in northwestern Wyoming. During the latter work, he rode in an attack with a party of forty others on a Blackfeet village to retrieve stolen horses, fighting for three hours and routing the Indians in what he called "the prettiest fight I ever saw."

He traded in Navajo country, trapped on the Grand, and hunted in Utah, and in 1842, with the beaver trade ending and his Arapaho wife Waa-nibe dead from fever, Kit took a job as a hunter out of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas. There, for a brief time, he was married again—this time to a Cheyenne woman—but after she left him he returned to Missouri to visit friends and relatives and to put his daughter Adeline in school.

Now came the great turning point in Carson's life—an association and series of adventures that would occupy him for six years and transform him, with reluctance on his part, from the relatively anonymous life of trapper, hunter, and Indian fighter into wilderness guide, soldier, nationally known figure, and hero of countless dime novels, at least one of which would haunt him all the rest of his life.

In May 1842, on a steamer headed up the Missouri, Carson met Lt. John C. Frémont of the Army Topographical Engineers, starting out on his first surveying expedition to the Rocky Mountains. On the deck of the riverboat, Kit listened to Frémont's plans and volunteered to join him: "I told him that I had been some time in the mountains and thought I could guide him to any point he wished to go."

Frémont made some inquiries and hired Carson at one hundred dollars a month. He would never regret the decision.

The first expedition, less than four months in duration, surveyed the South Pass, the "doorway" through the Rockies through which caravans of emigrants would travel on the Oregon Trail, and explored and surveyed the Wind River Range. When the party returned south, Carson left Frémont at Fort Laramie and in January 1843, traveled on to Bent's Fort, then to Taos. In February, he converted to Catholicism and married María Josefa Jaramillo, age fifteen. She was the daughter of a prominent citizen of Taos and sister-in-law of Charles Bent, who had opened Bent's Fort in 1833 and who had hired the then-sixteen-year-old saddle shop runaway as cavvy on the trading expedition to Santa Fe seventeen years earlier.

JOHN FREMONT ADMIRED CARSON'S GENTLE PERSONALITY, HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THE WILDERNESS TRAILS, AND HIS VAST FUND OF INDIAN LORE.

Carson joined Frémont's second expedition in the spring of 1843 and guided the party in an exploration of the Great Salt Lake, then across the Sierra Nevada in the dead of winter, following the Oregon Trail to Fort Vancouver. The party explored southeast Oregon and northwest Nevada, wintered at Sutter's Fort, and journeyed as far south as the Mojave Desert.

Frémont, in his reports and books on his expeditions, had unstinting admiration for Carson's gentle personality, his uncanny knowledge of the wilderness trails, and his vast fund of Indian lore. The "Pathfinder" (as Frémont was to become known), a demanding and irascible leader, seems never to have had a moment of doubt about Carson's skills and remained a lifelong friend and confidante.

Kit, returned to New Mexico from southern California, set up a farming operation on the Little Cimarron River near Taos and built a cabin there for Josefa, but in the summer of 1845 he rejoined Frémont for yet another expedition west. In northern California at the onset of the war with Mexico in the spring of 1846, Frémont captured the town of Sonoma, and during the short-lived "Bear Flag Republic," Carson served with both the Pathfinder and Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny in actions to wrest California from Mexican control. He was twice entrusted to carry dispatches to Washington and return with messages from President Polk, and on the last of these missions, in May 1848, is believed to have carried the first news east of the great gold strike on the American River above Sutter's Fort.

Following the war, Carson returned to New Mexico and began a farming-ranching operation near Rayado in partnership with Lucien Maxwell. But this tranquil life could never nail him down for long and he soon found work more suitable to his restless temperament. In the period 1849–52 he served as army guide and scout in Apache country and in one exploit, pursuing Jicarilla Apaches, he found poignant evidence, which angered and haunted him, of the national celebrity generated by his exploits with Frémont. In the fall of 1849, the Jicarillas had massacred a family of travelers near the Cimarron River and kidnapped a Mrs. White, her child, and a servant. Kit joined a detachment of First Dragoons out of Taos who located the Apache camp with some difficulty and routed the Indians after a swift fight. In the rubble of the camp, Mrs. White's brutalized

and still-warm body was found, an arrow in her heart. In his 1859 memoir, Kit wrote, "In camp was found a book, the first of the kind I had ever seen, in which I was made a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundred, and I have often thought that as Mrs. White could read the same . . . she would pray for my appearance and that she might be saved."

Neither Mrs. White's child nor her servant were ever located.

Up to the outbreak of the Civil War, Carson continued his farm-ranch operation with Lucien Maxwell, but also served as Indian agent at Taos, trapped and hunted along the South Platte and the Arkansas, drove horses to trade to emigrants at Fort Laramie, and dictated his life story to a clerk at his Indian Bureau.

In 1861 he resigned as agent and entered the army as a colonel of the First New Mexico Volunteer Regiment. He saw action at the Battle of Valverde, near Fort Craig on the Rio Grande, on February 21, 1862, under the command of Gen. Edward E. S. Canby, after which he received the brevet rank of brigadier general and orders to Fort Stanton in southern New Mexico. There he campaigned against the Apaches—this time the Mescalero tribe. In 1863, he was ordered to western New Mexico and Arizona to war against the Navajo, one of the tribes rustling cattle, murdering ranchers and their families, and in general terrorizing New Mexican settlers.

Carson's service under Gen. James H. Carleton against the Navajos was at best done reluctantly. He did not like Carleton, who had succeeded Canby as commander of the Department of New Mexico, or the general's tactics. Kit had fought and killed Indians all over the West—Crows, Blackfeet, Mojaves, Klamaths, Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches, Navajos—but had done so out of what he considered self-preservation necessity. He admired Indians, sympathized with them, knew their plight, and had earned a measure of respect from them. The Cheyennes had honored him with the name Vih-hiu-mis—"Little Chief"—and among the Navajos he was known as "Rope Thrower," a man who would rather capture than kill them. Carleton, on the other hand, had issued orders in the Mescalero campaign not to take male prisoners—an order largely ignored—and Kit knew that the great Mimbres Apache chief, Mangas Coloradas, had been assassinated at Santa Rita largely because of Carleton's implied orders.

Carson's last Indian campaign took place in November 1864, when he led an expedition against marauding Kiowas and Comanches.

In the Navajo campaign Carson, now a regular army colonel, obeyed orders he despised: with a force of four hundred men, he waged a scorched-earth campaign, burning villages and crops, killing cattle, driving the Indians to starvation, and, in the summer of 1864, invading their stronghold in the Canyon de Chelly in northeastern Arizona. There he led the forced surrender of some eight thousand Navajos who were subsequently marched to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, for internment.

Carson's last Indian campaign, also under the Carleton's orders, took place in November 1864, when he led an expedition of 335 men and seventy-five Ute and Apache scouts against marauding Kiowas and Comanches on the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle. At the old Bent's trading post of Adobe Walls, he fought a battle against upwards of two thousand Indians, which resulted in about sixty enemy casualties.

Colonel Carson took command at Fort Garland, Colorado Territory, in July 1866, and was released from the army in November 1867.

By now, at age fifty-eight and after forty-two years of strenuous living, his health was failing. He suffered from chronic bronchitis, noticed a weakening of his legs, and had persistent neck and chest pains, which seemed to signal a faltering heart. With Josefa, ever faithful to Kit during his absences, and their six children, he settled at Boggsville, near present-day Las Animas, Colorado. There, a physician visited him and diagnosed an aneurysm of the aorta so large it pressed against nerves in his throat, causing painful spasms of the bronchial tubes. The condition, the doctor said, was not curable.

Despite his weakened state and Josefa's nearing delivery of their seventh child, Kit made a last journey in February 1868 as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Colorado Territory. He led a delegation of Utes to Washington to press for a treaty guaranteeing the tribe exclusive hunting rights to lands on the western slope of the Territory. In the capital he met his old comrade, John C. Frémont. The Pathfinder was so dis-

tressed at his friend's haggard appearance and obvious suffering that he called upon some eminent doctors to examine the frail Kit. The aneurysm diagnosis was confirmed.

He returned home in April to the great tragedy of his life. On April 13, his beloved wife gave birth to their seventh child, a daughter, and ten days later Josefa died.

Kit lasted a month after that. He was moved to Fort Lyon where, at his insistence, he slept on the floor of the post surgeon's quarters under a big buffalo robe. He made his will, leaving his estate to the care and benefit of his children, and on the afternoon of May 23, 1868, he called out, "Doctor, *compadre—adios.*" A gush of blood poured from his mouth as his aneurysm burst and he died.

Kit was buried beside Josefa at Boggsville the next day. In January 1869, the two bodies were disinterred and reburied with Catholic rites in the cemetery at Taos.

His most recent biographers subtitled their book "A Pattern for Heroes," but Kit Carson fits no known template for a heroic figure. Indeed, nearly everything about him seems to contradict the standard portrait. For one thing, he didn't *look* the part. He was what one contemporary called "runty"—a slender five foot four in his moccasins, reddish-haired, freckle-faced, stoop-shouldered, and bandy-legged. Once, after he had attained some national fame, a group of emigrants on the Oregon Trail were told the celebrated scout was traveling with them. A group gathered to visit the great man and when he was pointed out to them, they stared a bit and returned to their wagons hooting and laughing—too smart to be hoaxed into believing that nondescript little man was Kit Carson!

For another thing, Kit never *acted* like a hero. Unlike Davy Crockett of Tennessee, with whom he is often—and wrongheadedly—compared, Carson had no hint of the showman in his character, rarely uttered anything witty or memorable, never wrote anything except his signature, never sought or held public office or any other public forum. When others made him out to be a hero, Carson seemed more bemused than amused, but he did have a wry sense of humor. A friend once showed him a dime novel, the cover of which depicted Kit dispatching several Indians with a blazing six-gun in one hand while holding a fainting maiden with the other. He studied it several seconds through his eyeglasses and announced, "That thar may have happened, but I ain't got no recollection of it." And when his "authorized" autobiography was published in 1859 and portions of the garish memoir read to him, he opined that his ghostwriter "may have laid it on a leetle too thick."

Yet no matter how unprepossessing in appearance or modest in manner, for better than a century and a half Kit Carson has been regarded in heroic terms. To some, only classical or mythical references would suffice to describe him: He was the Nimrod of the West, the Hector of the Prairies, the Bayard of the Plains, the Nestor of the Rocky Mountains. Even grim-faced Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, always sparing in his praise of others, after he met Carson at Fort Garland, Colorado Territory in 1866, linked Kit with Jason and Ulysses, Chevalier La Salle and Daniel Boone. And biographer Stanley Vestal, writing in 1929, ran the hyperbole to the stratosphere by writing: "Kit Carson's endless journeys through the wilderness make the fabled Mediterranean wanderings of Odysseus seem weekend excursions of a stay-at-home; his hu-

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manity rivals Robin Hood's; in readiness to fight and in chivalry to women he rates a *siege* [seat of honor] at the Round Table; his courage and coolness against hopeless odds may be matched but not surpassed by the old Norse heroes; while his prowess in innumerable battles . . . makes Achilles look like a washout."

Others kept their statements more earth-rooted if no less admiring. One of Carson's contemporary mountain men said Kit "wasn't afraid of hell or high water," that his "word was as sure as the sun comin' up" and that he "never cussed more'n necessary." John C. Frémont wrote of Kit as "prompt, self-sacrificing, and true," and said if he had served under Napoleon he would have been a marshal of France. And Thelma S. Guild and Harvey L. Carter, in their 1984 biography, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes*, state unequivocally, "Americans do well to remember Kit Carson as one of their heroes, for Fortune has seldom smiled upon a more deserving character."

Or, they might have added, a more unlikely one.

SUGGESTED READING

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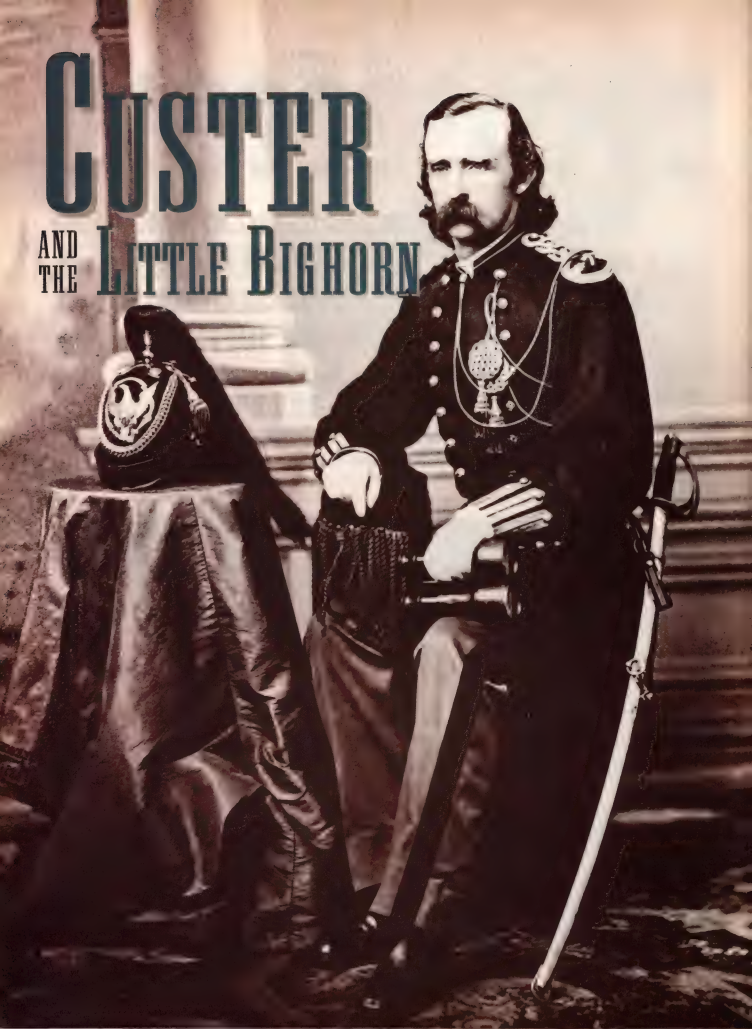

BY HUGH McCORD

COLORADO BECAME THE THIRTY-EIGHTH STATE in that centennial year of 1876 and Jack London was born in San Francisco. Alexander Graham Bell said the first sentences ever transmitted over a telephone wire that year and Queen Victoria became Empress of India. That year the Tilden-Hayes presidential election was snarled in an electoral college dispute, James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok was murdered in Deadwood, Dakota Territory, and the James and Younger brothers ended their outlaw careers in a hail of bullets outside a bank in Northfield, Minnesota. That year people were singing such new songs as "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," were reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and such new magazines as *McCall's*, and were buying such new products as player pianos, Remington typewriters, Heinz Tomato Ketchup, Budweiser Beer, Hires Root Beer, canned boneless ham, B.V.D. underwear, Bissell carpet sweepers and Sherwin-Williams paint.

Facing page: This photo of Custer in dress uniform was taken in March 1873 in Memphis, Tennessee. *Below:* Marble headstones at the Custer Battlefield National Monument indicate where Custer and his soldiers fell.

PHOTO BY DENNIS SANDERS

Midway through that mighty, muscle-flexing year, thirty-seven foreign

THERE WERE ERRORS IN THE EARLY REPORTS, BUT THE ESSENTIALS WERE TRUE: FIVE COMPANIES OF THE U.S. SEVENTH CAVALRY HAD BEEN ANNIHILATED.

nations and twenty-six states set up exhibits at Fairmount Park in Philadelphia and President Grant opened the official celebration marking the centennial of American independence. And then, by a perverse turn of fate, amid the gaiety of fireworks, patriotic banter, banners, and bunting, in the finest moment of a joyous, optimistic year, smiles vanished and brows furrowed as the news reached the centennial revelers of an awful event out on the western frontier.

On July 6 the *New York Herald* carried the story, based on a dispatch from the Bismarck, Dakota Territory, *Tribune*. The chilling headline ran:

Massacred
Gen. Custer and 261 Men
The Victims
No Officer or Man of 5
Companies Left to
Tell the Tale

The dispatch told of a battle eleven days earlier in Montana Territory "between General Custer's force and about five thousand Indians, near the Little Bighorn River, in which Custer and all the men of five companies of soldiers, about three hundred in number, were killed."

Reporters found Gen. Philip H. Sheridan among the Philadelphia celebrants and he said flatly that the report from Montana was preposterous.

Gen. William T. Sherman was more circumspect, saying the reports "lacked official confirmation."

But the story was soon confirmed and by July 10, with new horrific details appearing daily, the *New York Tribune* ran a poem by Walt Whitman titled, "A Death Song for Custer," containing these lines:

Thou of the tawny flowing

hair in battle,
I erewhile saw, with erect head, pressing ever in front,
bearing a bright sword in thy hand,
Now ending well in death the splendid fever of thy deeds.

There were errors in those early reports and in Whitman's poem—Custer was a lieutenant colonel, his hair had been cut short, he carried no sword, there were fewer than five thousand Indians in the battle—but the essentials were true and clear: On June 25, 1876, on a windswept ridge overlooking the Little Bighorn River in Montana Territory, five companies of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry, including its commander, had been annihilated.

Long before his name became synonymous with the worst debacle in American military annals, George Armstrong Custer had made a place in history. Fifteen years of his thirty-six-year life were spent in the army and by the time he led his regiment out of Fort Abraham Lincoln in May 1876 to its bloody destiny, everyone knew his name. He was the controversial personification of the U.S. Cavalry—an author, explorer, plainsman, Indian fighter, crusader against political corruption, hero, and the "Boy General" of the Civil War.

The son of a blacksmith born in the hamlet of New Rumley, Ohio, in 1839, Custer entered West Point in 1857 and even at the ear-

CUSTER HAD AN EGOIST'S INTOLERANCE FOR THE FLAWS IN HIS PEERS, A BLINDNESS TO HIS OWN SHORTCOMINGS, AND A PENCHANT FOR FLAMBOYANCE.

This painting of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, called *Here Fell Custer*, by Eric von Schmidt, is considered the most accurate portrayal by Custer historians.

© 1976 BY ERIC VON SCHMIDT. WORLD RIGHTS RESERVED.

liest stages of his military career managed to make his name known. He was a lazy, lackadaisical prankster with a penchant for insubordination. He graduated last in his class of 1861. But plunged into battle, a different George Custer emerged. War, as he had suspected as a boy when he hid novels of battle behind his schoolbooks, was his true métier and he would never be quite so fulfilled as when bullets were flying and he could ride to glory, saber in hand, against the enemy.

He served with generals Irwin McDowell, George B. McClellan, and Alfred Pleasonton and in 1863, at the age of twenty-three, earned a promotion to brigadier general of volunteers, the youngest in the Union Army. He commanded a brigade at Gettysburg and fought in all the cavalry actions of the Army of the Potomac—the Shenandoah Valley, Yellow Tavern, Winchester, Fisher's Hill, and Appomattox, among them—and a year later was given a second star and command of the Third Cavalry Regiment.

CUSTER HAD BEEN OFFERED A GATLING GUN BATTERY BUT REFUSED IT, FIGURING THE GUNS WOULD SLOW HIS MARCH.

In 1864 he married Elizabeth Bacon, daughter of a Monroe, Michigan, judge. He called her "Libbie." To her, he was "Autie."

After the war, and reduced in rank to lieutenant colonel in the regular army, Custer's orders sent him west. He served in Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock's Cheyenne campaign in 1867 and the following year led the Seventh Cavalry in its strike against a Cheyenne village on the Washita River.

In the spring of 1876 he traveled to Washington and gave testimony before congressional committees, elaborating on charges against the Grant administration for illegal post traderships and various other Indian Bureau frauds and peculations that had appeared in his newly published memoir, *My Life on the Plains*.

He dawdled and fretted in the capital and as his regiment outfitted for a campaign to round up "renegade" Sioux and Cheyenne in the Yellowstone River country, he appealed to Gen. Alfred Terry,

Four of the leading forces during the Battle of the Little Bighorn were Maj. Marcus A. Reno *(above)*; Capt. Frederick W. Benteen; and the Hunkpapa Sioux chiefs Gall and Sitting Bull.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

commander of his department, to be permitted to rejoin the Seventh for the forthcoming summer march. Grant, meantime, infuriated at Custer's charges against his Indian policies, determined to punish his accuser by keeping him kicking his heels in the capital. Custer wrote to Grant, "I appeal to you as a soldier to spare me the humiliation of seeing my regiment march to meet the enemy & I to not share its dangers." After the intervention of Terry and Gen. Philip Sheridan, both of whom wanted Custer in the forthcoming campaign, Grant relented.

He was utterly fearless in battle and utterly unpredictable in every other circumstance. He demanded blind obedience to his own orders yet flouted or ignored orders from his superiors. He imposed rigid discipline among his officers and men yet had little self-discipline. He passionately loved Libbie yet was unfaithful to her and took childish pride in being a "ladies' man." He had an egoist's intolerance for the flaws in his peers, a blindness to his own shortcomings, and a penchant for flamboyance he could not abide in others. His regiment was torn by factionalism. It included two important officers who hated him and others, including his brother Tom, who were blindly loyal to him.

Now in his thirty-sixth year, his curly reddish-blond hair, once worn shoulder-length, thinning, his icy blue eyes surrounded by crow's-feet, his face lined and freckled, he remained the hyperactive, fast-talking, war-loving, glory-seeking, ever-dashing figure, whether in cavalry blue, buckskins, or mufti, as he returned in May 1876 to Dakota Territory—to Libbie, to his regiment, and to his fate.

The Sioux-Cheyenne campaign of 1876 was the culmination of a struggle for the ancestral homelands of the nomadic tribes in today's Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana. Following the Civil War, these lands were invaded by white traders, prospectors, and settlers, and the U.S. government seemed to sanction this invasion by its partnership in the Northern Pacific Railroad, which sought to push its transcontinental line through the northern plains heedless of the sanctity of the lands to the Indians.

In 1868, in a treaty signed at Fort Laramie, the government set aside much of present-day South Dakota as a permanent, supposedly inviolate, Sioux reservation. The peace lasted six years, until 1874, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory and thousands of rapacious prospectors invaded reservation lands.

(The man who blazed the trail through the Black Hills that the treaty-breaking argonauts used—the trail the Indians called the "Thieves' Road"—was none other than George Armstrong Custer at the head of his Seventh U.S. Cavalry.)

The government tried to buy the Black Hills but failed and thousands of Sioux—the most renowned of which was the Hunkpapa chief Sitting Bull—and Cheyennes deserted the reservation and fled into the grasslands of Wyoming and Montana territories. These Indians were called "nontreaties" and the Commis-

TO VISIT THE LITTLE BIGHORN

THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT (until 1991, the *Custer* Battlefield National Monument) is located sixty-five miles southeast of Billings, Montana. From Billings, take I-90 to the Monument exit, then go one mile east on U.S. 212 to the Monument entrance. From the Visitor Center it is a short walk to Last Stand Hill where, on the west side, just below the granite monument, white marble markers show where the bodies of Custer and his men were found two days after the battle ended.

Gas, food, and lodging are available at Hardin, fifteen miles north of the Monument on I-90. It is in Hardin, on the Crow Indian Agency, that the annual June reenactment of the Little Bighorn battle takes place. It is staged as part of Hardin's Little Bighorn Days, which this year will take place June 23-25. The reenactment is staged six miles west of Hardin on Route 87.

Reenactment tickets are available outside the state and region by calling 1-800-366-8538; in Billings, Montana, at 406-256-2422; or through the Hardin Area Chamber of Commerce, at 406-655-1672. The tickets are $10 for adults and $6 for children; children five and under are admitted free.

sioner of Indian Affairs issued an ultimatum for them to return to the reservation by January 1876 or be considered "hostile."

They did not return.

Sheridan's plan called for three columns to converge on the Wyoming-Montana border where most of the "nontreaties" were said to be located. Brig. Gen. Alfred H. Terry would march west from Fort Abraham Lincoln (near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota) on May 17; Col. John Gibbon would move east with his five-hundred-man Montana column from Fort Ellis (near Bozeman) on April 1; and Brig. Gen. George Crook, commander of the Department of the Platte, would push north with 1,100 men from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, on May 29.

Terry's force, which marched out of Fort Lincoln with the regimental band playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me," consisted of under a thousand men—three infantry companies, a battery of Gatling guns, six hundred officers and men of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment, thirty-five Arikara scouts, one hundred fifty supply wagons, and a beef herd.

Terry determined to let Lieutenant Colonel Custer and his fast-moving Seventh take the lead in finding and attacking the Indians.

On June 17, Crook suffered a serious setback in his march north. On Rosebud Creek his force fell under attack by a sizable number of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors led by the Oglala chief Crazy Horse. The six-hour battle ended with the Indians leaving the field and Crook compelled to take his wounded and fall back to his Goose Creek base camp. There he determined not to proceed without support and took no part in the events that followed.

Meantime, Terry and Gibbon linked up on the banks of the Yellowstone River in southeastern

One question plagued everybody that afternoon of June 26: What had happened to Custer?

Montana and on June 21, on the river steamer *Far West*, tied up on the Yellowstone's bank at the mouth of Rosebud Creek, Terry gathered his officers to work out final details of the plan to find and defeat the hostiles.

The general's orders to Custer were ambiguous. Scouts had found an Indian trail leading up Rosebud Creek. Custer was ordered to take the Seventh and follow the creek, then swing north along the Little Bighorn. He then would cross into the Little Bighorn Valley while Terry and Gibbon took their more cumbersome force west along the Yellowstone to the mouth of the Bighorn, thence up to the Little Bighorn. These maneuvers were to put the Indians in a vise.

"It is, of course, impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement," Terry told Custer in a written order, "and were it not impossible to do so, the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders which might hamper your action. . . ."

Terry believed there were no more than eight hundred hostiles in the area and that they would run rather than stand and fight. In fact, there were at least seven thousand Indians, among them perhaps two thousand fighting men, in the loose coalition of tribes on the lower reaches of the Little Bighorn, the largest confederation of Indians ever known to have gathered in one place. All seven tribes of the Teton Lakota were represented—Hunkpapa, Oglala, Minneconjou, Sans Arc, Brulé, Blackfeet, and Two Kettle. There were also 120 Cheyenne lodges, a scattering of Yanktonnais and Santee Sioux, and even a few Arapahos. Prominent among the chiefs and warriors were Sitting Bull, Gall, Rain-in-the-Face, and Crow King of the Hunkpapas; Red Horse of the Minneconjous; Crazy Horse and Low Dog of the Oglalas; Lame White Man and Two Moon of the Cheyennes.

Many of the Indians were armed with .44 caliber, sixteen-shot Henry and Winchester rifles.

And they were not going to run.

On June 22, Custer led his troopers up Rosebud Creek following the Indian trail. His force consisted of thirty-one officers and 566 men in twelve companies, thirty-five Arikara and Crow scouts, a number of civilian packers, and a train of mules carrying rations, forage, and ammunition. He had been offered, but refused, a Gatling gun battery, figuring the guns would slow his march over rough terrain.

The Seventh was armed with the .45 caliber Model 1873 Springfield single-shot carbine and a Model 1872 Colt six-shot handgun. Each man carried 100 rifle cartridges and 24 for the pistol.

In Custer's force were four members of his family: his brother, Thomas W., captain of C Company; brother-in-law, James Calhoun, first lieutenant, of L Company; brother, Boston, a civilian forage master; and nephew, Harry Armstrong "Autie" Reed, who had joined his uncle for a summer excursion to see an Indian fight.

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by Bob S. Garrard

How many nights have you had to negotiate a dark walkway to the door hoping you wouldn't trip on something? Or how often have you stood in the dark fumbling with keys? If you're like me, you leave the porch light on all day, but you still have to find the porch in the dark!

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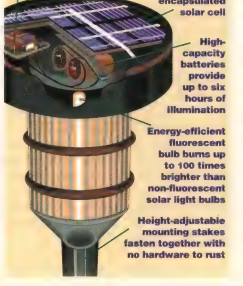
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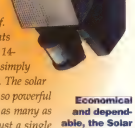

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Custer's scouts included "Lonesome Charley" Reynolds; the half-breed Mitch Bouyer; the Crows White-Man-Runs-Him, Curly, Goes Ahead, and Hairy Moccasin; and the Arikaras Young Hawk and Strikes Two. Bloody Knife, son of a Sioux father and Arikara mother, was Custer's particular favorite.

Besides Tom Custer and James Calhoun, among Custer's most important officers were Maj. Marcus A. Reno; captains Thomas Weir, Myles Keogh, George Yates, and Frederick W. Benteen; and his adjutant, Lt. William W. Cooke.

Both Reno, described by Custer biographer Robert Utley as "a besotted, socially inept mediocrity," and Benteen, "a fearless combat commander and able but crotchety company commander," loathed Custer and made little secret of it.

On June 24, after marching seventy-two miles in three days, Custer's scouts reported with growing alarm that the Indian trail up the Rosebud was getting larger and that the signs indicated a much greater force of hostiles than had been anticipated. Custer brushed aside these concerns and continued the march to the summit of the divide separating the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn Valley.

On the morning of June 25 a huge pony herd came into view fifteen miles distant in the valley, and shortly thereafter, the Sioux and Cheyenne lodges were sighted. After scouts reported that several Indians had been found near the Seventh's bivouac, Custer believed he needed to march quickly against the enemy and not wait for Terry and Gibbon's arrival. His vague orders gave him the flexibility to make quick field decisions.

He divided his command into three battalions. Captain Benteen and three companies of 115 men were sent to the southwest with

THE SOLE SURVIVOR OF CUSTER'S COMMAND WAS MYLES KEOGH'S CLAYBANK GELDING, COMANCHE.

orders to block any Indians from escaping and to "pitch into" any found. Major Reno and 140 men, and Custer with 215, marched west to the Little Bighorn to approach the enemy lodges. (The pack train, with 135 men under Capt. Thomas McDougall, lagged far behind.)

At about 2:30 P.M. a cloud of dust was spotted rising up from the immense Indian village in the valley and Custer, apparently intending to attack the camp from two directions, sent Reno and his three companies to ford the river and strike the southern end of the village. "Charge the Indians," he told Reno, "and you will be supported by the whole outfit."

Custer himself, with five companies of troopers, turned north to attack the Indians three miles downstream.

Reno's companies splashed across the Little Bighorn and rode down the valley toward the distant line of tepees. The Indians, at first surprised at the impending attack, rallied and poured out to meet the troopers who, now dismounted, formed a skirmish line. The fight began at 3:10 P.M., and within ten minutes the Sioux and Cheyenne had outnumbered Reno's command and had forced it to withdraw into a stand of timber beside the river. After forty-five minutes of fighting from this sparse cover, Reno withdrew farther, making a dash for the high bluffs on the east side of the river. The retreat disintegrated into a rout as the Indians pursued the panicky troopers, inflicting many casualties. Bloody Knife, among the scouts accompanying Reno, was shot through the head as he stood with his commander; his brains spattered Reno's face and coat.

Reno lost forty men and thirteen were wounded in fleeing to the bluffs. After a brief continued fight, the Sioux and Cheyenne abandoned the field and rode off to the north, where the sound of gunfire indicated that Custer had engaged the Indians at the north end of the great village.

Benteen, meantime, led his three companies to join the battered remnant of Reno's command, and arrived there at about 4:20 P.M. The regimental pack train later joined them and the combined force on the bluffs now numbered about 350. The troopers dug in and held off attacks until the late morning of June 26 when Terry and Gibbon approached from the north. Soon after, the Indians struck their lodges and withdrew to the south.

One question plagued everybody that afternoon of June 26: What had happened to Custer?

After separating from Reno, Custer and the combined battalions of captains Keogh and Yates—about 215 men in five companies—rode north along the high ground above the Little Bighorn. The vastness of the enemy camp and the enormity of the enemy numbers were now clear to all and at about 3:20 P.M., Custer instructed his adjutant, Lieutenant Cooke, to send a message to Benteen to join him with the ammunition pack animals. The scrawled message—"Benteen—Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs. P.S. Bring pack. W. W.

Cooke"—was carried by a young Italian-born trumpeter, John Martin.

It was the last message from Custer's command and Martin became the last man to see Custer and his 215 troopers alive.

Custer now continued northward, leading his men across a deep coulee (dry ravine) to the final battlefield.

At about 4:00 P.M. he met with a huge force of Sioux and Cheyenne led by the Hunkpapa chief, Gall. Badly outnumbered, Custer's troopers at first held off the attackers with well-directed volley fire, then fell back to the north toward what was later named Greasy Grass Ridge and Custer Ridge. There the retreat was met by another large force of Indians under the Oglala mystic, Crazy Horse.

Now, along what became called Battle Ridge, Custer's companies became separated and fought a number of individual actions until they were engulfed by the Sioux and Cheyenne tide.

The final stand occurred on Custer Hill at the north end of the high ridge when about fifty troopers clotted around their commanding officer, shooting their horses to make a breastwork. The Indians did not overwhelm this last remnant in a massive charge, nor did they encircle them and tighten the circle. Those few who broke and ran for the river were cut down in their tracks; Custer and the rest of his men died in a lethal rain of arrows and bullets.

The battle lasted about an hour and all in Custer's five companies of the Seventh were killed. The wounded died hideously, cut with knives, brained by war clubs, cleaved by axes. The dead, including the sole newspaper correspondent with Custer, Mark Kellogg of the *Bismark Tribune,* were savagely mutilated, many by Indian women who came to plunder the battlefield.

THE INDIANS WON THE BATTLE BUT LOST THE WAR. BY THE SPRING OF 1877 MOST OF THE "NONTREATIES" WERE BACK ON THE RESERVATION.

Custer himself died of gunshot wounds in his temple and chest but was otherwise unmarked. He was stripped naked and left among the corpses of forty-one of his men and thirty-nine horses. It is unlikely that the Indians knew they were fighting Custer or recognized him during or after the battle.

The sole survivor of Custer's command was Myles Keogh's claybank gelding, Comanche, found wandering the battlefield with many arrow wounds. (The horse was never put to work again and survived the battle fifteen years as the Seventh's prized mascot.)

Altogether in the Little Bighorn battle, Reno's casualties included, 263 were killed and sixty wounded. Indian casualties were probably under a hundred killed (some estimates are as low as thirty).

At about 11:00 A.M. on June 26, the Indians besieging Reno and Benteen's combined force on the bluffs above the river began riding off, alerted to the approach of Terry and Gibbon's Montana Column, setting the tinderlike prairie grass on fire as a smoke-screen to cover their departure.

On June 27, the surviving Seventh Cavalrymen set about the grim task of burying and marking the graves of Custer and his men. The naked and mutilated corpses, bristling with arrows, bloated and baked black in the searing sum-

The annual reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn features over two hundred Indians and a hundred cavalry riders.

PHOTO BY TRAVEL MONTANA, DONNIE SEXTON

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mer sun, were placed in shallow, hastily dug graves. The experience was so unnerving that no man who participated in it ever forgot it. Capt. Thomas B. Weir, one of Benteen's battalion commanders who had a bitter fight with Reno, trying to persuade his senior officer to move out to Custer's relief, was so seared by what he saw on Battle Ridge that he never recovered from it. He fell into alcoholism and died less than six months after the battle.

The Indians won the battle but lost the war. By the spring of 1877 most of the "nontreaties" had surrendered and were back on the reservation and on the government dole. In a short time they were forced to give up the Black Hills.

In December, the month Thomas Weir died in New York City, the first book-length biography of Custer appeared. Frederick Whittaker's *Life of Custer,* based mostly on newspaper sources, marked the beginning of a huge cottage industry in "Custeriana."

Libbie Custer survived her husband by almost fifty-seven years. Widowed at age thirty-four, she wrote three lively and still-readable books—*Boots and Saddles* (1885), *Following the Guidon* (1890), and *Tenting on the Plains* (1893)—about her life with her saintly Autie. She died on April 6, 1933, two days before her ninety-first birthday.

She is buried with her beloved husband at the West Point post cemetery on the heights above the Hudson River.

The debate, now continuing for close to 120 years, on what happened at the Little Bighorn and who was responsible, is unanswerable and therefore eternal. Whether he was victim of his own foolhardy glory-seeking or of the timidity of others, Custer is the most enduring of Western icons. His most recent biographer, Robert Utley, summarized his immortality this way: "If one measure of historical significance is impact on human minds, then the George Armstrong Custer of legend is a figure of towering significance."

SUGGESTED READING

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A CONVERSATION WITH

Judy Alter

"I've had fifty-six years to take care of myself . . . I've become a person in my own right, proud of my accomplishments and the recognition I've earned."

The speaker is Elizabeth Bacon Custer and this reflection occurs toward the end of a recent, acclaimed novel about her turbulent marriage to George Armstrong Custer, a twelve-year adventure that ended with the death of her husband and the massacre of his Seventh Cavalry command on the Little Bighorn River of Montana in the summer of 1876.

The novel is titled *Libbie,* the author is Judith MacBain Alter, and there are interesting echoes of Libbie Custer in the author's own story: for most of Alter's fifty-six years she has taken care of herself; she became a person in her own right and her accomplishments (among them a Ph.D. and publication of twenty books) were earned over certain obstacles.

Judy Alter (the name she prefers professionally), daughter of an osteopathic physician and long-time president of the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine, grew up in Chicago's inner-city southside. "Bookish" at a young age and a devotee

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Walker

think I always wanted to write," Alter says. "But I never thought I could write fiction."

of the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, and the novels of Francis Parkinson Keyes, she says, "I can remember summers when I'd ride my bike to the public library every morning, get out three or four books, spend the day on the porch reading, and go back the next morning for more." She describes herself in that period of her life as "skinny, shy, by my own assessment a little socially awkward, not a social butterfly." But, she adds, "I had good friends and had a good time—and made *awful* grades in high school."

College and career did not preoccupy her ("I was sure some man was going to marry me and take care of me"), but she attended Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, for two years, then returned to the University of Chicago and earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1961.

Both in high school and while attending the University of Chicago, Alter worked for her father at the osteopathic college. "I became (and could still be) a darned good executive secretary," she says, but admits, "I kept going back to school because I liked it better than working." She attended Northeast Missouri State University in Kirksville and earned a master's degree in English education there in 1964. During this period she had her first experience in professional writing, producing an alumni newspaper and serving as assistant editor of a medical journal for the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Alter also got married in Kirksville and in 1965 followed her husband to Texas, where he began his residency in surgery at the Fort Worth Osteopathic Hospital.

She worked as a secretary while attending night graduate classes at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth and in 1966 won a fellowship to complete work on her doctorate in English. She wrote her dissertation on how art and literature—the works of Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell, Owen Wister, and others—worked together to create the "myth of the American West," and was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1970.

"I think I always wanted to write," Alter says. "I wrote short stories when I was about ten, but I never really thought I could write fiction. Academic training discourages that. Then a friend gave me her mother's memoir—'The Story of My Life'—and I was fascinated with it. By serendipity, I had read several novels with teens as protagonists and I knew I could take the four-year-old girl of that memoir, make her fourteen, and tell her story."

The result of this experiment was Alter's first novel, *After Pa Was Shot,* published by William Morrow in 1978.

"It is kind of funny for a kid from Chicago to be as interested in the West as I am," she says. "When I was little I truly thought Texas was a foreign country and was amazed when my brother, who had been stationed there in the navy, reported that Texas was green and even had wildflowers!

"I've lived in Texas thirty years but still feel like an outsider, which rankles me a bit. I spite of what people may think in reading my 'Maggie' books, I do not ride horses; I don't feel comfortable *around* horses."

In the beginning of her career as novelist Alter was typecast as a writer of Young Adult novels and produced many of these—*Luke and the Van Zandt County War, Maggie and a Horse Named Devildust, Maggie and Devildust—Ridin' High, Maggie and the Search for Devildust, Katie and the Recluse,* among them—in the 1980s. She also wrote nonfiction books for children—*Growing Up in the Old West, Eli Whitney,* and *Women of the Old West* (all published by Franklin Watts)—literary studies of western writers, such as *Dorothy Johnson, Stewart Edward White, Elmer Kelton and West Texas,* and *Jeanne Williams,* plus stories, magazine articles, and book reviews.

In 1988, she won a Spur Award from Western Writers of America for her novel, *Mattie.*

Her novel *Jessie,* based on the life of Jessie Benton Frémont, will be published by Bantam Books in June.

Since 1987, in addition to writing her books, Alter has been director of the Texas Christian

don't intentionally write for women, although subconsciously I am fairly sure most of my readers are women."

University Press, the book-publishing arm of the university which specializes in the history and literature of the American West. She reads, edits, and supervises production of an average of eight to ten new books a year.

Alter is a single parent of four now-grown children, a past president of Western Writers of America, Inc., a member and secretary-treasurer of the Texas Institute of Letters, a member of the Texas State Historical Association and the Fort Worth Corral of Westerners, International.

She answered *LLWM*'s questions from her home in Fort Worth.

LLWM: With all you have done and are doing—earning a doctorate, raising four kids, directing a press—how in the world have you found time to write?

ALTER: I'm always uncomfortable with that question. I get it a lot and it makes me sound like some sort of Superwoman without a life beyond my work. I always feel obliged to explain that I have a rich and varied life with lots of friends, to dispel the notion that I am reclusive and spend every free minute at the computer. But I am not good at "hanging out," as the kids say, and I can't sit and watch hours of television. I write because I can't imagine not writing, not having a project going. I've always found the time for it.

* * *

LLWM: Do you aspire to write full-time?

ALTER: Yes and no. Writing, as writers know, is a solitary thing and I thrive on people. Staying home alone all day writing would be a mental disaster for me. Besides, being director of a press is my dream job—I love the work and am excited about the things I can accomplish. Maybe someday I'll be prepared to write full-time, but not soon.

LLWM: One might think, since you read, edit, and publish other people's books at TCU Press, review books, and write books, that you might get tired of books and manuscripts.

ALTER: No, I never tire of books—that's my world. I have a hard time drawing the line between work and play. Many of my friendships are among book people and much of my social life is related to books.

LLWM: Your fiction is almost entirely about women. Do female writers write more convincingly about women?

ALTER: I'd be hesitant to make such a generalization. For me, though, I write better about women, partly because I nearly always write in first person and I "get inside" a woman's head to tell the story. Naturally, I work in a lot of my own feelings and experiences as a woman. I don't think I could do that convincingly about a man. I am a big believer that there are major differences in the sexes. I have the experience of womanhood and it's different from manhood.

LLWM: Do you write expressly for the female reader?

ALTER: I don't intentionally write for women although subconsciously I am fairly sure most of my readers are women. But I am really pleased when a man reads and praises my work. If I could write about women in a way that interested both sexes, it would be, to me, a high accomplishment.

LLWM: I don't mean to flog this subject to death, but I have a couple more women-questions. Have the women of the West been downplayed, ignored, or mistreated in fiction? Is the situation different today than, say, a decade or fifty years ago?

ALTER: I have a speech I give in which I talk about the West in the conventional "wisdom" of it being a man's land and westerns being men's literature. I generally go on to say that men write them, men read them—and besides, they're a kind of literary subgenre. But of course then I go on to disprove all that. Women have always been an integral part of the experience and the literature of the West, but the general under-

he Custers' own correspondence indicates a strong possibility that Autie was a womanizer. He wrote boastful letters to Libbie."

standing of that has been slim. I think today there is more recognition of women as part of the literature—both as authors and subjects—and we have the historical revisionists to thank for that. In the 1950s I suspect the variety of women in the West was totally unrecognized—we were confined to the stereotypes of the schoolmarm and soiled dove.

LLWM: Is it true that after publication of your *Libbie* and *Jessie* novels, Bantam told you "no more wives of famous men"?

ALTER: Well, it's true my Bantam editor suggested no more wives, but I think he would have listened if I had come up with a good one.

LLWM: I was about to suggest Baby Doe Tabor or Mary Ann Goodnight.

ALTER: Baby Doe might be fun, but I can't see a novel about Mary Ann Goodnight. She's a fascinating, strong character, but there isn't enough "stuff" about her daily life to make a long novel—not the action of Libbie's life, for instance.

LLWM: I have a lot of questions to ask about *Libbie*, a novel I read and admire. You told one newspaper that you selected her as a subject because you wanted to write a book a New York publisher would see as important. Did that happen?

ALTER: Yes, I think it did. I wanted to write a book that New York would think had "commercial potential." *Libbie* was treated well by Bantam and got a lot of attention.

LLWM: Years ago I read Libbie Custer's books—*Tenting on the Plains, Following the Guidon,* and *Boots and Saddles*—and grew to think of her as a heroic figure. What was there about her that captured your imagination?

ALTER: At one point, fairly early in my research on her, I put the project away—couldn't get interested in any woman who could love such a man so blindly. But a contract and an advance make a difference in the way you look at things. I went back to it and ultimately came to admire her a great deal.

She was, for one thing, an exceptionally graceful writer (even though her books are totally unreliable when it comes to her beloved "Autie"). Maybe the thing that captivated me about her was that she was always game, even through all of Autie's high jinks, such as lifting her from the saddle while their horses were galloping at full tilt. I tend to write about women who have much more nerve than I do.

LLWM: Libbie was married to Custer for twelve years and survived him by nearly sixty years, never remarrying. Was her life's work as a "keeper of the flame" and to fend off his critics?

ALTER: I don't have much to say about Libbie's fifty-seven years of glorifying her Autie. I find it hard to believe and understand. You've noticed that *Libbie* ends with his death and a late-in-life epilogue. I skipped what I couldn't see how to deal with.

LLWM: I thought it was a very poignant thing in your novel that Custer's brother Tom, who died with him at the Little Bighorn, loved Libbie, as did an officer named James Coker and perhaps even the Russian Grand Duke Alexis. Is there historical evidence of this?

ALTER: Most of the source material on Libbie is a whitewash, but in some accounts there are hints that Libbie had a roving eye, although there is no evidence that she actually consummated any affair. There is an unsubstantiated story that Custer beat a young officer out of jealousy, and somewhere—I can't remember the precise source—there is the suggestion that Tom Custer loved her. To me, it all worked in a fictional treatment.

LLWM: Custer, on the other hand, seems to have had some *requited* affairs. Do you think Libbie was aware of his infidelities and the other features of his "dark side"?

* * *

am working on two book proposals—one about a whore, another about a female cross-dresser."

ALTER: Yes, I think she knew but, like all of us, blinded herself to what she didn't want to see. The Custers' own correspondence indicates a strong possibility that Autie was a womanizer. He would write boastful letters to Libbie of the women who were dancing attendance on him, then beg her not to be angry at her "boy"—really childish stuff.

LLWM: I recently asked Terry Johnston about Monaseetah, the Cheyenne woman Custer is said to have had a liaison with after the Washita battle. Terry is convinced there is ample evidence that this actually happened and even that she had a child by Custer. What do you think?

ALTER: One historian chided me severely for believing in such a story, but others—nonhistorians such as Terry Johnston—swear by it. Again, I plead that fiction gives you the leeway to take the Monaseetah story and run with it. Actually, I was never very specific about it, but there is strong circumstantial evidence pointing in that direction.

LLWM: One final question on the Custers: Do you think their life together was as great a love story as we've been led to believe?

ALTER: Yes, I think their life *was* one grand, passionate love affair. I think it's possible to be passionately in love, in spite of what your head tells you about someone. Knowing intellectually and believing emotionally are two different things.

LLWM: Your new novel is about Jessie Frémont. What are the differences between Jessie and Libbie?

ALTER: Jessie was a less passionate, romantic figure. She and Frémont had children and Frémont lived long enough for his failures to become obvious and to affect the family. Jessie had to be strong in a way Libbie never was. Jessie also brought to her marriage a vaster background and knowledge—the whole web of Washington politics, for example—than Libbie ever had. Libbie and Autie remain forever romantic partly because they never had family responsibilities and maybe because they didn't grow old together.

LLWM: What differences between Frémont and Custer?

ALTER: They were alike in many ways—men of great egos and grand ambitions, who enjoyed public adoration and who were ultimately failures in one way or another. They also were men who overshadowed wives who were, to my mind, more interesting than their husbands.

LLWM: In researching the lives of these great women, what strikes you as significant about nineteenth century western women, their lives and marriages?

ALTER: Not just western women, but women in general in the nineteenth century had great restrictions put on them—they had to abide by the things considered seemly for women. Jessie Frémont, in particular, pushed those boundaries a great deal. Women were seen as subservient to their husbands, never drawing attention to themselves. They were not expected to have lives of their own.

LLWM: Are you tired of having people ask you gender-driven questions?

ALTER: Not really. They make me think about who I am, what I do, and why.

LLWM: You write books containing romance, yet you do not want to be known as a romance writer. Correct?

ALTER: Correct. I am pleased to be in a relatively narrow market—writing historical novels about the American West that are *not* romances in the common definition of the genre. I am truly sensitive about having my novels categorized as romances, although the romance market has been very, very good to *Libbie*. I do not do steamy sex scenes and I think there's more than romance to *Libbie* and *Jessie* and the other books I am writing.

LLWM: One of your novels I couldn't find has the intriguing title of *After Pa Was Shot.* What is it about?

ALTER: It was based on a memoir—a young girl tells the story of what happens to her family after her father, a deputy sheriff in an East Texas town, is shot is killed. The mother is pregnant and grief-stricken, so the fourteen-year-old girl has to take charge of the family. Then the mother remarries—badly—and the girl is ultimately part of the rescue of her family. It's a juvenile, my first fiction, and was originally titled *A Year With No Summer.* The publisher changed the title and whenever I say it in a speech somebody always asks, "Pardon me? After *Paul* was shot?"

LLWM: Your post-*Jessie* novel is about a rodeo cowgirl?

ALTER: Yes, and it will be titled *Cherokee Rose,* my editor's choice, or *Ride a Wild Horse,* my choice. In the beginning it was inspired by the life of the rodeo star Lucille Mulhall, but I had to abandon that idea and let it take off on its own. It was a difficult novel for me because it is pure fiction and not based on a historical character.

LLWM: I hope you go with your editor's advice on the title. Besides the manuscripts submitted to your press, what and who do you read when you have time to read for pleasure?

ALTER: I read mysteries—Tony Hillerman and Dick Francis, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky. I read things with plots that draw me in—things different from what I write and publish. I want to find time to read more of Cormac McCarthy, Ivan Doig, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, people who are writing important literary works set in the West. When I get a book going, though, reading is a distraction. It is very easy for me to set aside my own writing to read an escape novel.

LLWM: Do you have a favorite western book or writer?

ALTER: I can't put my finger on either. Dorothy Johnson is a writer whose style I admire almost beyond description. I think Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* is one of the best novels I've ever read. And almost anything by Elmer Kelton is high on my list. My press is reprinting his 1970s book, *The Manhunter,* and I'm awestruck by the skill and craft of that slim novel. The best of Robert Flynn is awesome—*Wandering Springs* or *North to Yesterday.* And Jeanne Williams, who consistently does the best job of writing about women in the West. Ask me next week and I'll have new titles to add.

LLWM: Earlier in this interview you mentioned the good work of the historical revisionists. Our mutual friend Elmer Kelton, among others, has written of his discomfort over these historians blaming our forebears for ruining the West through their environmental ignorance and passion for destruction. What is your impression of this phenomenon?

ALTER: I have to agree with Elmer. My impression of the revisionists is that if they are moderate, as the best of them—Patricia Limerick, for example—are, they have made a tremendous contribution to our understanding of western history. True, they have demythologized it, but they have brought forth the reality of the experience of the frontier, and that is good for all of us. It's especially good for fiction writers, giving us a whole new world to write about.

LLWM: After the cowgirl story, do you have a book in mind?

ALTER: I'm working on several things. One is a novel based on the life of Etta Place, the woman associated with Harry "Sundance Kid" Longabaugh of Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch. We know almost nothing about her and that is what attracts me to her. Also, I am working on two other book proposals, one about a whore, another about a female cross-dresser.

LLWM: Seriously?

ALTER: Seriously. Go back to your question about nineteenth century western women. The only way for women to avoid the restrictions society placed on them in that era was to live outside society. In the West, there were two obvious ways to do this—to be a prostitute or to live as a man. So I envision one novel about each. The cross-dresser story will be easier because I have a ready model and life story out of the era itself; the whore story will be harder because she'll be a composite of a lot of stories.

LLWM: Sounds fascinating. How are you doing your research?

ALTER: In the library. (I was hoping you would ask that!)

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